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"NO! NO! BLACK HORSE BILL, THE OUTLAW CHIEF, EVEN BOUND AS NOW, VOWS NOT TO BE DRIVEN FROM THIS BORDER."

Dashing Charlie's Minute Men;

OR,

Black Horse Bill's Iniquitous Plot.

A Story o' Camp, Fo t and Mountain Trails.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE LONE CAPTIVE.

UPON the summit of a mountain range, among a group of rocks sheltered by a growth of pines, lay a man securely bound, hand and foot.

He was under the shelter of a wicky-up, lying upon a blanket, and within reach of his bound hands was a canteen of water and a haversack of food already cooked.

He evidently had been deserted by his captor, or left there for some special purpose, for he was all alone, excepting that a short distance off, on a plot of grass around which ran a rivulet coming from a spring among the rocks, was a horse staked out, a saddle and a bridle near.

The horse was a magnificent animal, as black as night, without a white spot about him.

With grass and water within the length of his stake-ropes, the horse was content, while the man appeared to be anything else than contented, for his face was dark with the thoughts which rushed through his brain.

He was a person whom few could gaze upon and not admire for his superb physique and handsome face, though a close study of his countenance would tell the good reader of human nature that he was not one to trust—that he was a man with a history, and if indications were not false, that he was one whose life had been evil.

He was dressed in black corduroys, stuck in top-boots, a black silk shirt, with the knotted sailor fashion, and in which sparkled a very handsome diamond, another stone of like size and value being worn upon the little finger of his left hand.

He wore his hair of hazel hue, falling to his waist, and a full beard reached to his belt, from which his weapons had been removed.

A sombrero of sable hue lay upon the blanket near him, and his rifle leaned against the rock close at hand, yet beyond his reach, for in addition to being bound, hand and foot, he was also made fast to the huge boulder, beside which he lay, so that he could not move from where he was.

The face was haggard now, rather from mental worry than physical suffering, it would seem, though his head was bound up as from a wound.

"Will he come back, or is this his revenge to leave me here to die of starvation, or helpless as I am, to be torn to pieces by the wild beasts that roam these mountains?"

"That, to me, had I in my power a man I hated—one who had wronged me as I have him—would be the very ecstasy of revenge.

"Yes, I would rejoice while I felt that my foe was in mental and bodily anguish.

"But could I blame him if he has left me here to die?"

"As boys together, we were devoted friends, dearer even than brothers, and yet I was treacherous, even then, to him, while he was true as steel to me.

"When, later, we were at West Point together, I was still the traitor, in spite of his sacrifices for my sake.

"Now he is a disgraced man, roaming about the world in an aimless way, he told me, and yet I believe he is not wicked while I am a fugitive from the law for the crimes I have been guilty of, and as Black Horse Bill the outlaw chief, I have proven a terror upon this border, have defied the military, the scouts and Vigilantes, to in the end be cleverly captured by the man who I fear has left me here to die.

"He has gone to my retreat, mounted upon my horse, which he says very truly will lead him there, and that means the end of my band, the rescue of my prisoners there, Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan, whom I had hoped to yet punish with death for so determinedly hunting down me and my Black Horse Bravos.

"But, with the capture of my hand the end has come, and if he returns, then will he expect me to keep my pledge and leave this border, for having my life spared by him.

"But, will I? Will I go from the land where I am harvesting riches for my future life of luxury?"

"No! I may pledge myself to what I please, but I shall act to please myself; I will not be driven from my hunting-grounds until I am ready to go away—a rich man.

"No! no! Black Horse Bill, the outlaw chief, even bound hand and foot as now, vows not to be driven from this border, he will stay to reap a rich revenge!" and the man laughed in a fierce, bitter way just as the black horse pricked up his ears at the coming of some one.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS RESCUER.

ALONG a trail on the border a party of horsemen were riding, and a strange-looking cavalcade they formed.

In the group were three men who differed from the other five, in that their appearance indicated worthy denizens of the frontier, while the quintette had a look decidedly lawless.

All these five were bound to their saddles, and two of them rode with apparent suffering, being wounded, though they were not being forced beyond their strength, the pace being a slow one.

They were truly a rough-looking set, dressed in black, and a singular feature was that they were mounted upon jet-black horses, and behind them followed a score of other animals all of the same jetty hue.

Some of these led horses were saddled, but riderless, while others carried pack-saddles well filled.

The five prisoners, for such they were, possessed a dogged, fierce look, mingled with one of anxiety as to what would be their fate.

The others of the party were men of striking appearance in face, form and dress.

One was mounted upon a black horse equipped with Mexican saddle and bridle. His attire was black pants, top-boots, spurs, and a silk negligé shirt, under the collar of which was a silk scarf in which glittered a diamond solitaire—the match to a like gem which he wore in a ring.

His revolvers were silver-mounted, as was also the repeating rifle which he carried slung at his back.

His face was bearded, and his hair fell down his back far below his broad shoulders.

The man's face was a study in its perfection of feature and nobility of expression.

By his side rode one whose name is well known upon the border as "Dashing Charlie, the Scout."

His form was tall and elegant. He was dressed in buckskin leggings, and hunting-shirt, and top-boots, and wore a dove-colored sombrero.

The horse he bestrode was a blood bay, and he rode, as did his companion, as one reared in the saddle.

Dashing Charlie's hair was of a golden hue, and worn long; his eyes were blue, and a light mustache shaded his mouth but did not hide the expression of daring and determination that rested there.

The third of these captors of the prisoners, who were known as the Black Horse Bravos, was a man also noted as a frontiersman. His comrades called him Diamond Dan, from the fact that he was adorned with these precious stones.

He, too, was mounted upon a bay, and rode with the grace of the perfect horseman.

"Well, pard, you certainly played a bold game and took your life in your hands, to come into the camp of the outlaws, and save my life, and Diamond Dan's.

"Those fellows meant to kill us, although they had kept us prisoners so long, and we owe you a debt we can never repay; and so, if you say it, you shall let the chief, Black Horse Bill, go free. I have not a word to say against it, now, though they will be very sorry to hear it at the fort."

"He richly deserves hanging, I frankly admit, Dashing Charlie; but, when I captured him, I pledged him my word he should go free if he told me just how to enter his retreat and rescue you and Diamond Dan.

"I left him securely bound until my return, and he must feel great anxiety, as, in case of my death, at the hands of his Terribles, he would starve to death, or become food for wolves, as no one would be apt to find or rescue him.

"I shall keep my pledge to him and let him go, and as he has vowed to me that he will at once leave the frontier forever, the army will no longer be defied and harassed by his presence."

"But, pard, will the scoundrel keep his word?"

"Well, he knows the alternative if he does not, and as his men are prisoners, or dead, and the secret of his retreat is now known, it is more than likely he will be glad to go."

Dashing Charlie shook his head in a dubious way, while he said:

"I hope he may, but I doubt it."

"If he breaks with me, then he shall receive no mercy at my hands," and there was a fierce light shining in the eyes of the rescuer of the two scouts, who was known only as he had called himself, the Mounted Tramp.

"We will go into camp, then, to await your return?"

"Yes; for I shall be gone but a few hours, rejoining you in camp to-night, and to-morrow we can go on to the fort with the prisoners and plunder."

"All right, pard. You are captain here. Diamond Dan and I will watch over the prisoners until your return. What say, Daniel of Diamonds?"

"You bet we will! But, I say, pard, let me

tell yer thet some time ago, when I were riding mail-courier, thet same outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill, held me up and robbed me of my diamond pin and ring.

"They was set in eagle-claws, and he hes got 'em now; I wants yer jist ter seize upon 'em, and I'll give yer your choice of ther pin or ring."

"Thank you, Diamond Dan; but as you see, I am supplied. Rest assured if he now has what is yours I will recover them for you; for he must give them up, willing or unwilling. I only wish I knew other property he claims and who the owners are, that I could make him restore it to them.

"I will leave you to go into camp, but return when I have set Black Horse Bill free."

And with this the Mounted Tramp rode away by himself, just as they reached a spot where the two scouts were to camp with their prisoners for the night.

CHAPTER III.

THE MOUNTED TRAMP'S RESOLVE.

FORT ADVANCE was a military post of great importance, for it was the headquarters of Brigadier General Wesley, commanding the line of defenses that kept the advancing pioneer settlers from the ravages of the Indians, and was most dangerously located.

At times, in throwing a force to different points threatened, the garrison would be reduced to a small number, and it was then that the Indians, ever on the alert for a show of weakness, would make a raid either upon the fort or the settlement.

There was a range of hills between the fort and the string of settlements, for there were three different places of white occupancy, extending along the valleys for miles, and rather thickly populated, but a raid of Indians in heavy force would have brought death and ruin upon them.

General Wesley was a man of ability, a genial gentleman, and a thorough soldier.

He had a small staff, and artillery, cavalry and infantry under his command, and as many of the officers had their families with them then at the post, it was pleasant quarters and a gay time generally in spite of living under a war cloud continually.

At the fort, Dashing Charlie* was the chief of scouts. He had been the captive of Indians in his boyhood, and won his spurs as a scout, guide and fighter of red-skins when a his teens. He was in every respect so trusty, so ready, so daring, that one and all had perfect confidence in him.

He had under his command a dashing set of fellows who had been variously known as Dashing Charlie's Deadshots, but whom General Wesley called his "Minute Men," as he was wont to say he could get the whole outfit of the scouting camp in the saddle and at work within a minute after an alarm was sounded.

As the Indians had been very quiet some months previous to the opening of this story, General Wesley and a party of friends had ventured out beyond the ridge for a gallop to the settlement for news, supplies, and a change of camp routine.

Returning toward evening from their excursion with tired horses, they were riding for the pass through the hills, where the trail led, when they were overtaken by a horseman who was wholly unknown, but who gave them the warning that they were riding into an ambush.

It was difficult of belief that the Indians were between them and the fort, so General Wesley questioned the stranger closely, but all he could learn from him was that his name was Horner Rockwell and that he was a Mounted Tramp.

Through this strange man the general and his party, among whom there were three ladies, were saved from death and captivity, and, under his guidance, were conducted by a secret pass to safety.

He also gave warning that an attack would be made in force upon the fort, and meeting Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan also going into a trap, he led them out of danger by his perfect knowledge of the range passes, and with them went to warn the settlement.

The stranger was said by those who knew the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill, to be that identical person; and as the mysterious man, later on—when the soldiers were pursuing the Indians defeated at the fort and settlement—was able to give them other invaluable aid, from being apparently friendly with the hostiles, he once more fell under suspicion of being the outlaw leader.

When Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan had been at length entrapped by the outlaws and made prisoners, this same unknown lone rider, still calling himself the Mounted Tramp, had appeared in the retreat of the Black Horse Bravos, and not only had rescued the two imperiled scouts, but had captured the entire band, excepting several slain, with all their horses and plunder.

Thus matters stood when the reader is made

*Chas. Emmett a noted plainsman, and now passing his latter years quietly on Long Island, far from the scenes of his adventures.

acquainted with the mysterious Mounted Tramp, Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan, and the bound captive awaiting the coming of his captor.

True to his promise this remarkable solitary rider was back in camp that night. He returned to find Dashing Charlie standing guard over his prisoners, while Diamond Dan slept near by, intending, of course, to take the next watch.

"Well, sir, did you find your man?" asked the scout, as the Mounted Tramp, after staking out his fatigued horse, came up and joined Dashing Charlie.

"Oh, yes; just as I left him yesterday morning; alive and alert as a sleepless eagle."

"And you allowed him to go free?"

"Yes, as I had promised to do. I never break my word. I gave him his own horse, took mine, and told him to go his own way in life, but never to cross my path again."

"Here are the diamonds Diamond Dan wished me to recover for him."

"Ah! he gave them up, then?"

"Well, he had to, of course, as I was armed and he was bound. I asked him casually where he got them, examined them closely and saw that they were as Diamond Dan described them, and as he told me the same story the scout did, I simply told him that I knew the man he had robbed and so should take them, which I did."

"Diamond Dan will be very glad to get them; but, pard, I am very dubious about the setting of the man Black Horse Bill free."

"It had to be done, Emmett, for, as I said, I never break my word to any man, and as he has gone his way I shall go mine; but should he reappear on this frontier I shall claim the right to hunt him down, and then no power can save him from my vengeance—for such it will be."

"And may I ask if you will not join my Minute Men as a scout? I should very much like to have you one of us!" said Dashing Charlie, earnestly.

"Thank you, no, for I shall enlist in the army to-morrow as a private," was the announcement of the strange man.

CHAPTER IV. A SOLDIER.

It was a surprise and a joy to all in the fort, when the strange cavalcade appeared, the next day, with Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan in the company, rescued by the Mounted Tramp, as we have noted.

Every effort had been made for many days to discover the retreat of the outlaws, and to rescue the two scouts, but in vain; therefore they had been given up as dead, as had also the Mounted Tramp, who, having been last seen with the Indians in their retreat, had not been heard of since.

The soldiers cheered and cheered; the scouts yelled themselves hoarse; the ladies waved their handkerchiefs, and the children shouted with delight to welcome back the two brave scouts.

The outlaw prisoners were glared at savagely as they were led off to the guard house, and then the strange man, who was now the cynosure of all eyes, made his way to report to General Wesley.

There were many who still believed him to be the outlaw chief, for those who had seen the ravager and had suffered at his hands, firmly believed that the stranger was none other than Black Horse Bill, playing a double game for some diabolical purpose.

But as if wholly unconscious of the eyes upon him, the stranger made his way to headquarters, accompanied by Dashing Charlie.

General Wesley was seated upon the broad, pleasant piazza of his commodious quarters, while with him, having been his guests to dinner that day, were Captain Abner DeLong—a handsome cavalry officer and his beautiful wife, Eloise. She was accompanied by Gabrielle Garland, a schoolmate and kinswoman, who had come to the frontier to spend some time as the guest of Mrs. DeLong.

Though the possessor of several millions, and a very beautiful woman, Gabrielle Garland seemed to prefer the life led in a frontier fort to dwelling in her elegant city home with a *chaperon*, for she was an orphan and her own mistress.

Miss Viola Howland, the daughter of an army officer, who had been the general's particular friend, and who was the sister of the surgeon's wife, and made her home with them, with Surgeon and Mrs. Hollowell, and Lieutenant Calvin Wainwright, made up the guests of the general to dinner that day; and all were present when Dashing Charlie advanced with the Mounted Tramp.

With the exception of Surgeon and Mrs. Hollowell, the party were the same who have been mentioned as having been saved from riding into an ambush through the warning and interposition of the Mounted Tramp, and as they all greeted Dashing Charlie warmly, they also turned to welcome the mysterious man to whom they owed so much.

"I owe my escape, and Dan's, general, to this gentleman, who not only rescued us, but also captured the outlaw band and all their plunder, though several were killed from necessity," said Dashing Charlie, with great earnestness of

manner, and gazing admiringly on the mysterious man at his side.

"Permit me to say, General Wesley, that but for Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan being captives in the outlaw retreat, and the fact of my striking resemblance to Black Horse Bill, the outlaw chief, the capture could not have been made; but with so much in my favor, the rest was comparatively easy."

All gazed upon the handsome, sad face of the stranger with undisguised interest and admiration; all seemed to feel the magnetism of his manner, and to be impressed with the melody in the tones of his voice, which was rich and full, carrying out fully the make-up of a splendid man.

"I fear you are too modest, Mr. Rockwell, of your own powers, for I am sure you have accomplished a most heroic work, and now that we meet again let me thank you for all that I am indebted to you for services rendered the Government, my friends, my officers and men, and myself. I congratulate you upon the capture of the outlaw chief, and will see that you receive the reward offered for him, dead or alive."

"Pardon me, General Wesley, but I am not one to accept blood-money, if the outlaw chief was in my power, which he is not, for I set him free last evening."

"You set that man free, after you had him in your power—a man upon whose head there are rewards offered amounting to fifteen thousand dollars? What does this mean, sir?" and the general spoke with considerable feeling.

"It means, sir, that the breaking up of the outlaw band, and the rescue of the scouts, was accomplished by a compromise with the outlaw chief, whom I captured and held as a prisoner until I was able to carry out my plans for the rescue of his prisoners and capture of his men in their retreat."

"This done, I set the outlaw free, he being under pledge to at once leave the frontier forever."

"And threw away a small fortune in doing so, Rockwell."

"As I said before, sir, it was blood-money, and I did not care to possess money made by the death of a fellow-being, be he ever so vile and vicious."

"You are a strange man, Rockwell. Few in your position would argue thus; but, though I can but regret that this infamous outlaw has escaped his just dues—death at the end of a rope—still I can but feel grateful to you for wiping out his band and rescuing my two best scouts, while we all owe to you other debts of gratitude hard to repay."

"Now you will remain at the fort, I hope, for some time with us; just as long as it suits your pleasure to do so."

"Thank you, General Wesley, but it is my intention to enlist, if you will accept me as a soldier."

"You enlist as a soldier!" said the general, with evident amazement, for there was that about the man which made him feel that he was no ordinary person, that he possessed an education, and had been driven by some cruel fate to become a wanderer.

"Yes, I am determined to be a soldier in the ranks, sir," was the firm response of the Mounted Tramp.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNDERHAND MOTIVE.

GENERAL WESLEY was not the only one of those about him surprised at the decision of the Mounted Tramp to enlist as a private soldier.

All of those present had taken particular notice of the man when he had led them from the dangerous ambush they were riding into.

His splendid face, well-toned voice and superb horsemanship had impressed them, while there was an air of refinement about him, a courtly grace which the rough border life he led had not destroyed or even affected.

Gabrielle Garland had been drawn toward him in a way she could not understand or explain to herself. She was one who was not impressionable, and back in her early girlhood, when just verging toward sixteen, she had had the one love of her life.

She was a woman to love but once, no matter how many sincere friendships she might have, and that one love she had known.

A shadow had fallen upon that girlhood affection, and she had had to bury it deep within her heart, but, for all the seven years which had passed since then she had not forgotten the youth who had become her idol then, who had asked her one day to be his wife.

That youth had gone away—was dead she had been told; yet she did not believe this; but she had consigned the past as well as she could into the grave of forgetfulness, and now when she had lived her twenty-three years, was beginning to talk of dying an old maid, she the possessor of a vast fortune, and one who was as beautiful in character as she was in face and form.

From what had not this man saved her, in keeping her out of the hands of the red-skins?

Now, as she heard him assert his intention of

entering the army, throwing himself away, as she regarded it, as a private soldier, she spoke up quickly:

"Pardon me, sir, but I hope you will reconsider your determination, for there are so many better fields of usefulness open to you, you a man of courage, determination, genius, perhaps, and certainly of education."

"I thank you, Miss Garland, for your kind consideration; but the army has been the goal of my ambition, and I am determined to enter it," and the man looked squarely down into the lovely eyes of the maiden.

"No, Rockwell, I cannot let you enlist as a private, for I feel that you have done that which will secure you an appointment from the President, and I shall make the request for a second lieutenantcy for you at once, setting forth your claims to the appointment."

"You are most kind, General Wesley, but I would not accept any commission thus obtained. I am ambitious to win my way up, to rank, sir, from the very lowest round of the ladder, and if Captain DeLong will accept me as one of his troopers I will be glad to enlist."

"I will accept you, of course, Rockwell, but the general will, I know, be glad to appoint you to a regimental sergeant's place."

"No, sir; I enter as a private with the hope of working my way up the scale, asking no favors," was the firm response.

"Then if this is your resolve you shall enter my troop, Rockwell," remarked Captain DeLong.

"I thank you, sir, but I have one request to make?"

"Certainly."

"After I have enlisted, sir, and it will be to-day, I should like one month's leave of absence, with your kind permission."

"Certainly, I will grant it, and you, general, I hope will approve it?"

"With pleasure, Rockwell; but I must again say I would rather not see you enter the army as you do, but instead, become one of Dashing Charlie's Minute Men."

"I sought to gain Mr. Rockwell, sir, in my band, but he preferred to be a soldier," Dashing Charlie observed.

"I shall be glad, sir, to be sent on scouting duty whenever I can be of service, though a soldier," the Mounted Tramp remarked, and Captain DeLong responded:

"Yes, and I shall be glad to call upon you for your services as a scout, knowing as I do from experience what you are capable of."

"Now, if you will go with me to my troop, I will see that you are taken care of."

General Wesley made another effort to get the man to change his mind about enlisting, while Gabrielle Garland said earnestly, as she laid her tiny hand upon his arm:

"It is not yet too late, so pause and consider; the captain will, I know, give you a week to make up your mind."

"Yes, take a week to think it over, sir," urged Mrs. DeLong, earnestly.

"Yes, you shall have the time, Rockwell, for remember, an enlistment means a great deal."

"That is a good idea, Rockwell, of Miss Garland's; so take a week to consider what you will do," the general urged.

"I thank you all for your exceeding great kindness toward me, but my mind is made up; I came here to enlist as a common soldier and I need no time to consider what I decided upon long ago. I am ready, Captain DeLong."

"Well, if you are determined, let me wish you success and rapid promotion in your new calling, Mr. Rockwell," and Gabrielle Garland extended her hand in her honest way.

The man grasped it, bowed low, and was turning away, when Mrs. DeLong said:

"And allow me to offer my best wishes for your advancement and happiness, Mr. Rockwell."

Again he bowed low, and turning to Captain DeLong with a military salute, said:

"Ready, sir!"

"That man has seen military service, I am sure," declared the general, as the stranger walked off with Captain DeLong.

"That man is a fool," was the ill-natured remark of Viola Howland. "I half-way believe he has some underhand motive in entering the army."

"I believe that honorable ambition prompts his act," Gabrielle rejoined, in her quiet way.

CHAPTER VI.

A TREMENDOUS SURPRISE.

FOR some time after the departure of Captain DeLong and the mysterious recruit, nothing was talked of at the general's quarters except the man who had so strangely entered the army.

Who he was no one knew, other than to conjecture that he was one whom misfortune, sorrow, or perhaps crime, had driven to the frontier.

Viola Howland remarked, in her sarcastic way:

"I am sure that he is a fugitive from justice, though I am sorry to shatter your *beau idéal*, Miss Garland, by a suspicion so cruel and unromantic."

"He is my *beau ideal* of splendid manhood, I admit, Miss Howland, and I cannot believe a man with his face can be a villain; but, be he who or what he may, I can only say that I am glad I am not callous to the promptings of gratitude toward one who has served us all so well."

Viola Howland bit her lips with vexation, for she saw that all had felt Gabrielle's rebuke was a just one; but Captain DeLong's return at that moment caused the general to ask:

"Well, DeLong, have you made a soldier of him?"

"Yes, sir; he has enlisted."

"Under what name, may I ask, Captain DeLong?"

"That of Homer Rockwell, Gabrielle."

"I wonder if it is his own name?" ventured Miss Viola Howland, seemingly determined to betray a bitter spirit toward the stranger.

"I have his furlough here, general, for your signature, please, granting him a month's leave of absence," said Captain DeLong.

"I will sign it with pleasure; but, when does he leave, DeLong?"

"At once, sir. I shall send him the furlough by the orderly."

"So soon?"

"So he requested, sir."

The paper was signed and an orderly carried it to the newly-enlisted soldier, who, a few minutes after, was seen to ride away from the fort mounted upon his splendid black.

"Those captured horses of course go to Rockwell, Captain DeLong," the general remarked.

"Yes, sir, for he captured them, and he will have no trouble in selling them. I will be glad to take one."

"And I another," General Wesley remarked.

"Select me one also, Captain DeLong, and one for Eloise, as a present from me," remarked Gabrielle Garland promptly.

"As souvenirs of the Black Horse Bandits?" queried Miss Howland.

Gabrielle announced with a smile:

"Oh, no; as souvenirs of their brave captor."

Dashing Charlie had the captured horses in charge. Both he and Diamond Dan had been given one by the Mounted Tramp, who had reserved one for himself and told the scout to put the others up for sale, the money to be equally divided among the chief of scouts' Minute Men and the troop in which he had enlisted.

"That is very clever of him indeed," the general declared.

"He certainly is a remarkable man," added Captain DeLong, and with his wife and Gabrielle they returned to their quarters, the latter remarking in a thoughtful way:

"I know that I am not wrong, Eloise, but somewhere I have met that strange man before, and under circumstances that have left their impression; but when and where I cannot recall."

The days passed in their dull routine of duty at Fort Advance, and the Mounted Tramp had been almost forgotten save by those who had been most intimately connected with, or interested in, him.

The captured horses had mostly been purchased by officers and had brought a very fair price, but Gabrielle had insisted upon purchasing three of them, one for Captain DeLong, another for his wife, and the third for herself, and as Dashing Charlie had made the selection they were all splendid animals.

The proceeds of the sales had been equally divided, according to Homer Rockwell's request, between Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men and the troop in which the donor had enlisted, and by both scouts and fellow soldiers he was unanimously voted a noble comrade.

The outlaw prisoners were being held for trial, and since their capture not a lawless act had been heard of in the vicinity of the fort or the settlement.

Whither the new recruit had gone no one knew, for he had left no clew. He had simply ridden away alone, stating that he would be back upon time—a month from that day.

The stage-coach on the dangerous run on the Overland was making its regular trips again with brave Racket Rube on the box, he having fully recovered from a wound received in the last tussle with the Black Horse Bravos—their last raid—at which time Lieutenant Calvin Wainwright of the U. S. cavalry had likewise been badly wounded.

But the day before the leave of Homer Rockwell expired the coach of Racket Rube rolled into the fort with five horses instead of its complement of six, the fifth being hitched at the head of one of the leaders.

Upon the box sat Racket Rube, and his face wore an anxious look as he called out to Lieutenant Wainwright who was near as the coach drew up:

"Our old enemy, Black Horse Bill, is at it again, lieutenant, for he shot one of my horses, and I've got a dead man inside the coach whom he sent over the range."

"I tell you, lieutenant, if Black Horse Bill hasn't that new soldier, the Mounted Tramp, then I'm the most fooled man on the border."

"See if I don't prove him to be the outlaw chief."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DANGER OF THE OVERLAND.

THE run on the Overland made by Racket Rube to Fort Advance, was one which few drivers, brave as they were, had the hardihood to undertake.

On three occasions had Racket Rube been wounded, and scores of times he had saved his passengers from robbery and been threatened with death for so doing by Black Horse Bill and his band.

He had also often had his coach "held up" and his passengers robbed.

The trail was a dangerous one, and only a splendid hand with the reins, and possessing nerve as well, could take a six-horse team and coach over in safety.

For these reasons Racket Rube, as his annual orgies of a month's time had caused him to be called, received good pay and great consideration from the managers of the Overland.

He kept his team and coach in the very best condition possible, dressed well himself, and was a large man with a great big heart and genial nature.

The dangers which he passed through he seemed to enjoy greatly, and after recovering from his last wound received from the Black Horse Bravos he mounted his box and drove off on his long and perilous run without any cloud of dread upon his face.

It was upon his return run that he again came to grief.

He had several passengers within, and people were beginning to feel confidence in traveling once more as they heard that Black Horse Bill had been driven out of the country and that all of his band were either killed or prisoners.

Even Racket Rube felt that the only danger lay in the single trails, and he was going along Crows' Roost Range, the old stamping place of the outlaws, smoking a cigar and calmly thinking over his last misfortune there, when suddenly came the startling command:

"Halt that coach, Racket Rube, or take the consequences."

And out from among the rocks rode a horseman whose appearance caused Racket Rube to exclaim:

"As I lives, that is Black Horse Bill up to his outlaw tricks ag'in!"

But Racket Rube had the good sense to obey the summons, and out from his hiding-place rode the horseman.

A man of almost majestic mien, with long, flowing, brown beard, hair falling down his back to his waist, dressed in black pants and silk shirt of the same hue, with a diamond sparkling in his scarf and another upon his finger, while he had high top-boots and a sable sombrero; he was one to command admiration as well as inspire awe in the bravest beholder.

He was mounted upon a superb black horse, equipped with Mexican trappings, and the spirited animal arched his head proudly, as though he felt his superiority to the team which his rider had brought to such a sudden halt.

Racket Rube quickly cast his glance over among the rocks to note if others were there, but saw no one.

The face of the outlaw wore a cruel, triumphant smile, while, riding up near the coach, he said:

"I suppose you thought Black Horse Bill was dead, Racket Rube?"

"No; I thought yer hed j'ined ther church, darn yer. I is sorry yer hain't dead, but yer time is coming, you bet!" was the plucky answer.

"Doubtless, as we all of us must die; but I am glad to see you out again after the severe wound you received when you brought Lieutenant Wainwright here to capture me."

"He didn't come ter capter yer, but ter bring yer a pardon from ther general for ther services he thought yer hed done him, and as yer refused ther pardon, then he thought he'd take yer in."

"I am no fool, Racket Rube, and when I surrendered at discretion to the lieutenant, I knew my men were in ambush further along the trail, and both you and he found it out, too."

"Yas, yer nearly kilt us both, but we'll even up some day."

"But, what did you think had become of me?"

"We was told by ther gent who looks so much like yer and wiped yer band out, thet yer hed quit ther country; but it hain't so, as this all shows."

"Racket Rube, you are a fool, as I so are all of you, for there is no man who looks like me, as you assert."

"What does yer mean?"

"Just what I say. I was the one who gave the warning of the Indians coming to the fort and to the settlement, and also saved the general and his party."

"I was tired of the band and had wanted to get rid of them, so I pretended I was the man you knew as the Mounted Tramp, and so captured my own men and rescued Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan, pretending that I had set Black Horse Bill—myself, mind you—free."

"It is all a deception. I am Black Horse Bill, as you see, and it was I who enlisted in

Captain DeLong's troop a month ago, and I did it for a purpose.

"I have been on leave for a month, getting me another band. They are watching you now from among those rocks."

"I have halted your coach, for I happen to know that there is an agent in the stage who is going to see Miss Gabrielle Garland, and who has for her a large sum of money, sent by her attorneys."

"That man's money is what I have held you up for, and I will have it, so advise the tenderfoot to make no fuss about it if he values his life."

"Do you hear, Racket Rube?" and the outlaw smiled in his cruel way, while the driver glared at him in utter amazement.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TENDERFOOT'S FATE.

RACKET RUBE was completely nonplused at what the outlaw had said.

Was he in reality the Mounted Tramp, as he had been suspected of being?

How had he discovered the fact, except as a spy at the fort, that Miss Gabrielle had her attorney's clerk coming to see her and bringing a large sum of money with him, which she had decided to invest in Western lands and mines, for General Wesley had told him of the coming of this messenger and requested him to look out for the agent.

And now, the outlaw chief coolly informed him that he knew all about it!

He also asserted that he was not alone, but had men near, another band he had organized for his lawless work.

Racket Rube knew well that it was easy work to raise a band of outlaws upon the frontier, so that did not seem like an untruth, and he could hardly believe that the man, daring as he was, would again take the trail without aid near at hand.

But the driver was a good man to play a bluff game and he said:

"See here, Black Horse Bill, yer hain't no more got men among them rocks than I has soldiers in this coach, though I has got them as don't want to be robbed of ther leetle they has with 'em."

"As fer ther agent ye speak of I is right glad he got left on this run, but I'll git back in time ter tell him not ter make it to ther fort until they sends soldiers to escort him."

"You cannot fool me, Racket Rube, for the man I seek is along with you."

"He hain't!"

"I say that he is, for I saw him take your coach back at the station."

"You seen him?"

"I did."

"Where was you?"

"I was the old man with white beard and short hair who asked you the price of a ride to the fort to see my soldier boy over there. Do you remember the old man, Rube?"

"Yas, and I guesses it was you; but now show up yer men if yer wishes ter rob my passengers, for yer can't do it alone. I'll fight yer on that, Black Horse Bill."

The outlaw smiled as if confident and replied: "I'll not let you see my men, but you shall hear them."

Then raising his voice he called out:

"Ho, Bravos on the left, are you ready?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" came the prompt response from the left of the trail.

"Ho, on the right! are you ready?"

"Ready, sir," came back the response from the right.

"Well, Rube, what do you think now?"

"I don't think yer is sich a liar as yer looks, Black Horse Bill."

"You are complimentary; but shall I show you that there are some of my men back in the rear, so that you may not be fool-enough to resist, for I do not wish to kill you, Rube?" and a dangerous light came into the outlaw's eyes.

"No, yer needn't show me th'r's any more sich bad comp'ny round, for I has hed enough of yer, and I don't wish ter die by your shootin' me, for ther Devil would git me sure, with sich a send-off."

"Then you will not force me to kill you by resisting this raid on your passengers?"

"I has done all I is able ter do, Black Horse Bill," was the resigned response.

"You are wise," and with this the man rode nearer to the coach.

Within the vehicle were three passengers, who had listened breathlessly to the conversation between the driver and the outlaw.

"What! does the driver mean that we are to be robbed without resistance?" cried one of the passengers, a young man with the dress and air of a city youth.

"Keep still, young feller, or you'll lose yer scalp, for Racket Rube hev said and did all he could," warned a rough-looking man who sat beside him.

"And let one man bully us?"

"That is more of 'em."

"You, sir, will aid me in defending our property surely?" and the young man turned to the other passenger who had the look of a well-to-do frontier settler.

"Pard, I hain't such a fool as you seem to think I look, for when Black Horse Bill holds up a coach, and says pan out, I am the one to oblige him," was the answer of the settler.

"Out upon such a lack of courage as you two show, in spite of your looking like the boasted heroes of the border!" scornfully exclaimed the young Easterner.

"Yas, we has sense," the old man said, resignedly.

"If I had two of my friends here from New York I could wipe out a dozen such outlaws."

"See, here, my young friend, do you wish to get back to New York again?" the settler asked.

"I do, of course, and will."

"Then don't make a fool of yourself and resist the man that has held up this coach, for he is as merciless as a wolf."

"I do not fear him," was the angry retort.

"All right. We have warned you, for we on the border know just what Black Horse Bill is," the settler said, just as the outlaw rode up to the coach door and called:

"Throw open that coach door and come out quickly, all of you, and with hands up!"

The door was thrown open and out sprung the young man, while he said, as he faced the outlaw with revolver in hand:

"See here, Sir Bandit! I will not submit to your robbing me, so up with your hands or I will fire!"

Black Horse Bill laughed while he replied:

"You are just the one I want. Take that dose of medicine, with my regrets!" and, quick as a flash, the road agent sent a bullet in search of the life of the brave but foolhardy young man, who, with a groan of anguish, dropped in his tracks.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OUTLAW'S TOLL.

"BLACK HORSE BILL, that was the most coward shot of your cussed life!"

The words rung out sharp and fearless from the lips of Racket Rube, when he saw the cruel act of the outlaw leader in shooting the young man who had dared resist being robbed.

Instead of, as the two other passengers had expected, turning his revolver upon the driver for his reproving words, the outlaw laughed and replied:

"He was a fool, Rube, and so met the fate of one."

"But now, to see what this game pans out for me."

"Come, sir, what have you to offer?"

He addressed the old borderman, who promptly responded:

"It's durned little yer'll git, but I prefers ter give yer my money than have yer take my life," and he handed over a leather bag in which there was some gold, silver and a few bills.

The outlaw glanced at the contents contemptuously, but thrust it away in his saddle-pocket and turned to the settler.

"Come, you next."

"Yes, it's my next shave, I suppose, and yet I have but little, for I spent all the money I took East with me, so am just getting home."

"Give me what you have."

The settler handed out his wallet, with the remark:

"There's about forty dollars in money, and that you can have, but the two notes of friends in the settlement are no use to you, so I'll keep them."

"Let me see the notes."

And he glanced at the date, amount and signatures.

"These are good, and I will collect them, so put your name on the back."

The settler laughed at the idea of the outlaw collecting the notes, but took the pencil handed to him by Black Horse Bill and wrote his name on the back of each with the words:

"Pay to Black Horse Bill."

"That will do."

"Now search the body of that tenderfoot, and see what you find valuable there."

"See here, Black Horse Bill, I'll die before I rob a man, and a dead body at that, to aid you," firmly avowed the settler.

The outlaw saw that in the face of the man which told him he would be as good as his word, so he said:

"I believe you would do so, Robert Rand, so I will not demand it of you."

"You know me?" gasped the settler, in surprise.

"Oh, yes; I know far more than you think I do, Robert Rand; but as you will not help me, I shall have to do it myself."

"Ho, men! Keep your guns covering Racket Rube and these two men, and fire if they attempt any double game on me," called out the outlaw, wheeling his horse and facing the rocks.

"Ay, ay, chief," came the reply from among the rocks.

And then, dismounting, the road raider approached the body of the young man who had sacrificed his life in his inconsiderate defiance of the bandit.

Black Horse Bill found a large Russian leather case in the inner pocket of his vest, a watch,

chain, a small box of jewelry, and a purse with a couple of hundred dollars in it.

"Not a bad day's work, I declare, for there is a large sum of money in this case, and the jewelry is of considerable value, belonging as it does to a lady."

"Now, Reuben, my gay Jehu, throw the body into the coach and drive on; present my compliments to General Wesley, and say to him that Black Horse Bill is again on the trails, and that he can put him down upon the army roll as a deserter."

"Come, lose no time, for I must get well away from here with my hand before Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men take my trail."

The two men tenderly lifted the body of the young man and placed it in the coach.

When they sprung in and Racket Rube called out:

"Farewell, Billie, and don't you forget it, I'm going to your hanging-bee some day, and I'll help at the rope, t-o."

"I extend a cordial invitation now, to the circus, Reuben," was the smiling retort.

The coach rolled on its way to the post, leaving the outlaw in the trail gazing after it.

"Well, I'm out forty dollars but am in a good many hundred which I've got in the lining of my old hat," said the old borderman with a chuckle as the coach rolled on.

"Yes, and I've saved my money, too, for he only took my pocketbook."

"I only hope he'll try and collect those notes, for Dick Darcy who gave me one of them is the worst man in the three settlements and the outlaw will meet his match if he ever tackles him," the settler responded, glad to have escaped so easily.

"But this poor fellow lost his life, and I fear the outlaw got a big sum in money belonging to that pretty Miss Garland at the fort."

"Yes, and her jewelry, too. I hope that the general will let Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men now devote their time to running down those Black Horse Bravos."

And so the two men discussed the tragic happenings of a few minutes before, while the coach sped along at a galloping pace to bear its ghastly burden and unwelcome news to the fort.

The driver was stern and silent, keeping his horses under stiff rein and whip. To report the robbing and death of the young messenger, and that Black Horse Bill was again upon the trail—to announce that the man who had pretended to have set the outlaw free and then had enlisted as a soldier, was none other than the outlaw chief himself—these were indeed matters calculated to impress the intrepid driver of the Overland with a profound sense of the importance of his mission.

CHAPTER X.

GABRIELLE'S FAITH.

It was a very serious gathering assembled in the headquarters of General Wesley, that night following the arrival of the coach of Racket Rube.

The general was there, with Captain DeLong and Lieutenant Wainwright, and Mrs. DeLong and Gabrielle Garland were also present.

Racket Rube and his two passengers were also there, and they were to give in their testimony of the tragedy at Crows' Roost Range.

In his characteristic way Racket Rube had told his story just as Dashing Charlie, all ready for the trail, had come in and heard it.

"You are allowed to question the witnesses at your will, Dashing Charlie, as you must have all the light upon this affair possible to guide you," the general said.

"I would ask then, sir, if Racket Rube saw any sign of the men with the outlaw chief?" said Dashing Charlie.

"No, pard, but I heard them."

"What did you hear?"

"They answered the chief when he called to them."

"Where were they?"

"One in the rocks on the right, another over the hill on the left, and he said he had others in the rear."

"And you heard them too, sir?" and Dashing Charlie turned to the settler who answered:

"I certainly did hear them."

"And you also?"

The borderman replied:

"I heard 'em and they was there."

"You seem to doubt that he had men with him, Emmett?"

"It is hard to doubt, general, in the face of such proof as we have heard; but I cannot believe that the outlaw has gotten another band together; but I will know at dawn, for I will go to the Range to-night, sir, with my men and camp there, ready to begin the hunt at dawn."

"And what do you think of the outlaw being the man who enlisted in Captain DeLong's company as Horner Rockwell?"

"I do not believe it, sir."

"He says so."

"True, sir; but, wait until the leave of the new soldier is up and see if he returns."

"That is what I say, Dashing Charlie," said Captain DeLong, while Gabrielle Garland remarked in a low, but firm tone:

"Even then I will not believe that he is the outlaw."

"You mean, Miss Gabrielle, if he does not return when his leave is up?" asked the general.

"Yes, sir."

"You certainly have a profound faith in him, Miss Gabrielle," observed the general, with a smile.

"I have faith in human nature, sir, as expressed in the face of the man who enlisted in Captain DeLong's company," was the firm response, and Captain DeLong as firmly echoed:

"And so have I."

"Well, Miss Gabrielle, you have been the greatest loser through this road-agent's act, and are entitled to an opinion; but will you please tell Dashing Charlie what your losses are, so that, if he captures this man, he may know just what to return to you?"

"My letter from my attorney, sir, of ten days ago, stated that he would dispatch his clerk, a most trustworthy young man, with the money I desired, which was twenty-five thousand dollars, in bills of one hundred, five hundred and a thousand dollars' denomination."

"In addition he was to send me a jewel box I wrote for, and which had been stored in the Safe Deposit Company's vaults."

"This was a small box, but contained a miniature of my mother and father, set in a gold frame, and another of a dear friend, since—since—dead, with a ring and a bracelet which he had given me, and some minor trinkets of more or less value; but I would relinquish double the sum in money I lost to get back that little box of souvenirs," and Gabrielle Garland's voice quivered as she spoke.

"I'll do all I can, Miss Garland, to restore them to you," said Dashing Charlie.

"And hang ther thief," muttered the old borderman, but all heard the remark and smiled at its earnestness.

"Well, Dashing Charlie, you have heard about all there is to tell, so go at once, and remember you are not limited as to time, while if you need one, two or even three troops of cavalry to aid you, send a scout with the request for them."

"Yes, and I will hold my troop ready to start within five minutes after your messenger arrives," Captain DeLong remarked.

"And remember, Emmett, this outlaw is to be taken at any sacrifice alive, so thus instruct your Minute Men."

"I will do so, General Wesley," and with a salute to his officers and a courtly bow to the ladies, Dashing Charlie took his leave, followed by Racket Rube and his two passengers, the driver remarking as he left:

"If there can be two men jist alike as thet outlaw Black Horse Bill and the soldier, then I'm the most mistaken pilgrim in the Wild West country."

As Captain DeLong, his wife and Gabrielle went to their quarters, they saw a body of horsemen riding out of the fort. They were in Indian file and fifteen in number, with three well-laden pack-horses along, as though they were going upon an extended scouting expedition.

"There go Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men, and if Black Horse Bill and his band are to be run to earth those scouts will do it," said Captain DeLong.

"I sincerely hope that they will take the outlaw chief alive, for then you will all see that I am not mistaken in asserting that he is not the Mounted Tramp to whom we owe so much, and who enlisted as a private soldier in your troop, Captain DeLong," said Gabrielle Garland in a tone that showed nothing but the surest proof could swerve her from her belief in the man who had claimed that he was not the outlaw chief.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OUTLAW'S TREASURE.

WHEN the man who was a bound prisoner in the little camp upon the mountain-top, rode away from the spot upon being released, he took a trail which led to the valley below.

He had not gone very far before he halted, and hiding his horse in a pine thicket took up position behind a bowlder, where he remained lying in wait for an hour or more.

"No, I guess he has not followed me; but I will be sure," and with this he rode back to the camp and found it deserted.

Following the fresh trail he held to it until nightfall, when he camped.

But at daylight he was again on the trail and followed it to where it joined the camp of Dashing Charlie and those with him.

Seeing that they had gone on toward the fort, the outlaw gave a sigh of relief and said:

"Now to return to my deserted retreat."

With this he set off in another direction, following the trail the scouts and their prisoners had come.

Reaching a valley where three streams flowed into one, making a river, he rode into the water at the crossing of the creek on the right and followed the current upward for miles.

It was slow work for his horse pushing along against the water, but at last he came to where the stream widened, as it flowed through a canyon with high precipitous banks upon each side.

Upon his right the water deepened and foamed in eddies, which would have caused a stranger to avoid it, but the horseman pushed right through it though it rose to his saddle-skirts, and made his way behind a large piece of rock which had fallen from the cliff.

A cavern here was visible, and dismounting at the entrance, he went on into the dark tunnel to soon see light ahead and come out into a fertile but small glen in the very midst of surrounding cliffs.

Was he to discover any enemy in possession?

He scanned the whole glen keenly, pistol in hand, ready for any emergency.

Thus he stood for several moments, holding his restive horse; but no sign appeared of that secret haunt's invasion by an enemy or the presence there of friends.

All seemed as deserted as an abandoned settlement.

Assured of this he mounted again, and rode down into the glen toward where there was a row of half a dozen small log huts.

Advancing cautiously, pistol in hand, he dismounted at the first one came to and entered.

It was deserted and stripped of its furniture, whatever it consisted of.

The next one was then visited and the next, until he had entered each one.

"They made a clean sweep of it, my plunder, horses and all, and the men who do not lie there have been taken to the fort to be hanged," and he pointed toward several newly-made graves not far distant.

"Well, I am fortunate still, for I escape, and not a soul other than myself knows the secret retreat which I shall now make my home.

"Now to see if by any unlucky accident they found my treasure."

With this he went to his horse, mounted again and rode him up close to a cliff.

Standing up in his saddle he was able to reach the trunk of a tree growing out of a crevice in the rocks.

Drawing himself up by this trunk he found, level with his head, an opening a foot square among the rocks and not visible from below, in the valley.

Secreted in this opening was a large rubber bag, and taking it out of its hiding-place as he discovered it the outlaw gave a yell of delight at the thought that his treasure at least was safe.

Then he lowered himself to the back of his horse once more and rode down to the rear of the further one of the row of huts.

Back among the rocks was what appeared to be a pile of logs, but turning them aside a cavity was revealed in which was a quantity of stores.

"The men gave the scoundrels no aid in finding these provisions at least, so I am amply supplied for a long while to come with food, and of the very best.

"But it is a load for a horse and I will have to walk while I pack it upon you, Arab," he said, turning to his steed.

But, as he turned, his eyes fell upon an animal coming toward him up the glen and dragging his stake-rope and pin after him.

"Well, this is good fortune for me!" cried the outlaw.

"They did not see that horse, which was doubtless astray, or they would have taken him also.

"Yes, and he is one of my own, too," he said, as he recognized the animal, which was a good match for the one he was riding.

The horse came right up to Arab and was easily caught by the outlaw, who then made a pack-saddle of what he found scattered about that was suitable, and packed upon it the supplies in the cache among the rocks.

There were hams, bacon, flour, coffee, crackers, sugar and other things edible in large quantities.

"These will do for the present," he said, as he took about a fourth of what was in the cache and then replaced the logs as before.

Mounting then and leading the pack-horse which he had been so lucky as to find in the hour of need, he set off on the trail out of the valley the way he had come.

He went around the mountain spur where he had been a prisoner, and though night came on, he held steadily along the trail and did not halt until midnight, when he rode up into the range which lay between the fort and the settlement.

"No one knows of the retreat in this range, and the approach to it will leave no trail.

"Yes, here I will be safe," he muttered.

And dismounting he continued his way up the steep trail on foot, leading his horses one behind the other.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNKNOWN RETREAT.

WHEN the Mounted Tramp, who had enlisted as a soldier of Captain DeLong's troop left the fort, he rode away as though bound upon some special mission.

His way lay across the plains toward the distant range lying between the fort and the settlement.

As he kept on his way he appeared like a man lost in deepest reverie, and once or twice his thoughts found vent in words.

"How strange, my meeting with that man, and here upon the frontier!" he mused aloud.

"Yes, I am a soldier now, and must work my way up; but what will be the outcome of it all, I wonder!

"It is my duty first to go to my retreat and attend to what demands my attention, for once I return to the fort I cannot do so."

So on he traveled until he came under the shadow of the range.

As though thoroughly acquainted with the locality through which he was passing, he held on in the darkness unerringly, and at last came to a small cabin situated under an overhanging cliff.

The place seemed to have been long deserted, the door was open and swung to and fro upon its hinges.

But the Mounted Tramp entered, leading his horse after him.

Then he struck a match and lighted a small lantern he carried with him.

This revealed the interior of the deserted cabin, with its table, bunks and shelves.

In the rear was the chimney, and upon one side were two bunks against the wall of logs.

Taking hold of the end nearest the chimney, the horseman drew hard against it, and after a second effort, out swung the wall with the two bunks against it, for it was ingeniously swung on heavy hinges at one end.

The swinging out of the logs revealed the opening of a cave behind it, and into this the man went, his horse faithfully following him.

Then the wall was drawn back into place again, and mounting—for the cavern widened as he went along—the man continued on his way, now carrying his lantern, throwing its light ahead.

For a long distance he rode and then emerged into a wild gorge several acres in size, in the very heart of the range and overhung by towering precipices upon every side.

It seemed to be a spot where several caverns centered, as their black mouths were seen here and there in the cliffs.

Grass grew luxuriantly, and a cataract dashed through the place.

Going down to the stream, the man watered his horse and then led him to a spot where he staked him out to feed for the balance of the night.

His saddle and bridle he placed near, while his well-filled haversack of provisions he threw upon his shoulder and started up the canyon.

He still carried his lantern, which lighted his way, and soon came to a small log hut standing in a picturesque spot just where a waterfall dashed over the rocks above.

The door was closed, but opening it the man entered and glanced around him.

"Yes, all is as I left it. No one ever comes here, for not a soul, I verily believe, knows of this retreat.

"Had I not hitched my horse that day in the cabin to those bunks, and he, pulling back, had drawn out the log wall, I never would have found it.

"It was said that an old hermit dwelt there, and no one goes near the spot since his death, calling the place haunted, so not a soul can know the secret of the long cave which leads here, and the others that go from here to other parts of the mountain range, and through one of which I led General Wesley and his party to safety that night, and again saved Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan from death by leading them by the trail I came to-night, though I blindfolded them to do so.

"I had expected to make this secure retreat my home for a long while, but now a different field opens before me, and I must follow whither the hand of fate shall lead me.

"Yes, I am the football of destiny, and I will not at erve from what I believe is before me, bring it what it may of sorrow and suffering.

"How strange it is that the destiny which shapes my ends should have led me here, should have brought me to spend my life amid surroundings I had little dreamed of!

"But there is a duty for me to perform, and I will not shrink from it.

"No, I will start on my way to-morrow, and boldly face the alternative.

"Then will I return to these scenes amid which my lot is cast, and stand ready to face the result, be it what it may."

He had stood on the threshold of his cabin musingly talking aloud, as though conscious that no one was near to hear him.

Then, with a sigh, he set to work to build a fire, for there was a pile of fagots in the hut, and after cooking his supper he wrapped himself in his blankets and lay down to rest.

The singing of birds awoke him in the morning, and throwing open his cabin door he started back with an exclamation of amazement as he beheld standing before him a man whose rifle covered his heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRUITLESS SEARCH.

WHEN Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men rode away from the fort at night, their trail led them directly to Crows' Roost Range, where they went into a camp at a mountain spring, the scene of the holding up of Racket Rube's coach and the killing of the young clerk who was bearing to Gabrielle Garland her money and box of jewelry.

Camping upon the scene they were ready to begin work in the early morning hunting for the trail of the outlaw band of Black Horse Bill while it was fresh.

In spite of the testimony of even Racket Rube, who was generally right about what took place, no matter how exciting and tragic the adventure, Dashing Charlie did not believe that he had had with him an organized band when he had halted the stage.

"One man he may have had, perhaps two, but no more, I feel sure.

"In fact, Diamond Dan, I do not believe he had any one with him," the scout had said to the man of all his Minute Men whom he knew he could place the most confidence in.

"But, Charlie, how about the answers to his call to his men?"

"Racket Rube hain't steery, and he sart'inly said he heerd 'em answer him."

"True, but I have an idea about that Diamond Dan, which I cannot make known just now even to you."

"Yer don't think they was echoes?"

"Oh, no!" and Dashing Charlie laughed at the thought, adding:

"You know, Dan, an echo repeats only what you say."

"That is so, chief; but I can't git onto ther trail your mind are following."

"I will tell you all about it some day, Dan, but not now.

"It is that very idea about those answers which puzzles me most, I confess to you, about the Mounted Tramp, that is as to his really being the outlaw chief or not."

"You is not going back on him, be you, pard?"

"Oh no, only I am puzzled about it, though I wish to believe that the Mounted Tramp and Black Horse Bill are not one and the same man.

"You see, the man who enlisted as a soldier was so full of nerve and real manhood, and served us all so well at the risk of his own life, that I do not wish to feel that he can be the outlaw, who is a road-thief and as cruel as an Indian."

"That's so, Charlie, and I feels as you does; but we'll hev ter find out or they'll set us down as no good as scouts."

"Well, we'll get to work when the daylight comes," was the scout's answer.

And they did, for they were up early, and as soon as they had had breakfast all but three men left the camp to go upon the trail.

They went to the scene of the halting of the coach the day before.

There were the tracks as plain as they could wish, and there was a red stain upon the ground with footprints near it, which told the story of the tragedy.

There, too, was the trail of the robber's horse, and it was followed back to where he had ridden out from among the rocks.

The scouts all dismounted, so as not to disturb the trails, and they went among the rocks where it was told them by Racket Rube that the outlaws had been in hiding.

But there was not the faintest trace of a trail to be found.

They searched everywhere and yet could find none.

They could not even follow the trail of the outlaw chief's horse beyond the place where he had left the rocks to ride up to the coach, and back among them again.

Splendid scout that he was, Dashing Charlie was puzzled.

"Men, set your wits to work, for that man certainly came to this ridge to rob the coach and went away from it; but I'm blest if I can find any clew to how he did it," said Dashing Charlie.

The scouts were anxious one and all to solve a mystery which had thwarted their chief, and so they went to work with a will.

The range was approached in every direction, and encircled by them, and even upon hands and knees they went over the ground again and again.

But all in vain, for after the entire day spent in search, they could not find out how the outlaw and his band had come to the range, or how they left it.

That he had done so they had ample proof, yet from whence had he come and whither had he gone, and those with him, if he had men with him—and that Dashing Charlie still would not be convinced of?

"We will await the return of Racket Rube, and have him tell us just how it happened," said the chief of scouts.

The next day the coach came by and Racket Rube explained the whole situation as it had been, and would not be convinced until he had

gone among the rocks and discovered no trails there of the outlaws.

"Waal, this beats my time, Dashing Charlie, for I doesn't understand it; but, keep along ther trail and see what yer kin find out, fer yer see I has Miss Gabrielle Garland along with me on this trip, and she is going to Omaha to hev her lawyer meet her there and fix up about ther death o' thet young feller, and the loss of her money, and ter git some more, so I doesn't want her robbed when she goes back with me, Charlie, so stick to ther trail close."

"I'll do it," was the firm response of the scout, and he raised his hat to Gabrielle as the coach drove on.

CHAPTER XIV.

GABRIELLE'S MISSION.

GABRIELLE GARLAND was a very daring and determined young lady.

She was not to be swerved from her purpose by any danger or discomfort she might have to face, once she made up her mind to carry out a certain purpose.

The purpose she had now formed was to have her lawyer meet her at the nearest city she could reach by stage-coach, and he by railroad, for she wished to have him take the news of the sad death of her son to the widowed mother whose sole support was the young clerk who had been killed by Black Horse Bill.

Gabrielle happened to know something of the youth, and not thinking of her own loss in money and jewels, she was determined to have her attorney pay over to the widow a certain income for her support, as the clerk had lost his life while in her service.

She desired also to get another sum of money to replace what she had been robbed of, for investment, and to have a personal interview with her attorney in regard to certain affairs of business.

For these several reasons she had decided to take the trip Eastward, and, reaching the first stage-station where she could dispatch a message by a pony rider to the nearest telegraph-office, she would wire her lawyer to meet her and to bring with him the money she needed.

But there was a deep motive underlying all this which Gabrielle Garland did not make known even to Eloise DeLong and the captain.

This was the hope that she might meet face to face upon the trail the outlaw, Black Horse Bill!

She was determined to see for herself if he was the one who had rescued her from the Indians and afterward had enlisted as a soldier in the army.

"I can never be deceived, once I meet him face to face."

"Yes, I will know whether he be Homer Rockwell, the Mounted Tramp, or Black Horse Bill, the Mounted Tramp," she said to herself, decisively.

Then, too, she mused:

"I will place rewards along the trail, offering a liberal reward for the restoration of that box of souvenirs the outlaw robbed me of, and perhaps I may regain all."

Having decided to go, Gabrielle could not be urged from her purpose either by Captain or Mrs. DeLong.

The general offered to send a cavalry escort with her under his aide, Lieutenant Wainwright, if she insisted upon going, but this she refused.

"Racket Rube will take good care of me, and then too, you know, I shall carry my revolver, and know how to use it if need be."

"Dashing Charlie is also on the trail with his Minute Men, and they will frighten the outlaws off, while, as men have to risk their lives and money on the Overland, why should I shrink from doing so?"

So she argued, and, having made up her mind to go, she was soon prepared for the long ride.

Racket Rube was not pleased that he was to have as company a lady, for he had an idea that the coach might now be held up at any time on the run.

But Gabrielle mounted upon the box with him and soon made herself so agreeable that he was really glad that she had come along.

When the coach was met at the range by Dashing Charlie and his men, Gabrielle listened attentively to all that was said, and when Racket Rube returned to his box and drove on she said:

"Is not Mountain Spring just ahead of here?"

"Yes, miss; it be."

"Will you post this slip of paper upon a tree there for me?"

"I'll do it, miss," and taking the paper Racket Rube read, written in a bold hand, very distinct:

"\$10,000 REWARD

will be paid to the one who returns to me my box of jewels, containing three gold mounted miniatures as well as jewelry, or will arrange to restore the same to me.

"GABRIELLE GARLAND,

"Fort Advance."

"Waal, miss, thet ought ter fetch 'em, that's sart'in," said Rube, as he returned to his box

after placing the placard on a tree near the spring where no one going there could fail to see it.

"Now show me the different places you have been held up upon the trail," said Gabrielle as they drove on.

"Mostly it has been near Mountain Spring, miss; but I knows all the other places pretty well, and some of 'em is well marked by graves, let me tell yer."

"Well, at each one of those places I wish to put this offer of reward."

"I'll do it, miss; but I only hopes yer'll git ther box and yer money."

"I sincerely hope so; but Dashing Charlie did not seem very hopeful it seemed to me, as he could find no trace of a trail."

"I don't wonder, miss; but these outlaws didn't fly thar, and yet they got thar without leaving any tracks, that's sart'in, for what Dashing Charlie can't find in the way of a trail hain't worth lookin' fer."

"But here is another place whar I was held up, and yer see thet grave over in the thicket shows that thar was red work done here too."

"Yes, but who was killed?"

"A young miner going East with all he had in the world, miss, and Black Horse Bill got it and along with it took his life."

"I'll stick one of them papers up here too, miss," and dismounting from the coach the driver did so.

Then he drove on his way once more, and at each place where a coach had been stopped, one of the rewards offered by Gabrielle Garland was tacked upon a tree.

When at last Racket Rube drove into the settlement at the end of his run he gave a sigh of relief and said:

"I feels thet glad, miss, you wasn't held up, that I could get drunk with joy."

"Don't do it, Racket Rube, for remember I go back over the trail with you," was the smiling rejoinder.

CHAPTER XV.

LOOKING INTO A RIFLE'S MUZZLE.

CAPTAIN DELONG was so anxious about the going of Gabrielle Garland, over the now most perilous trail of the Overland, that, after consulting with his wife he decided that it would be a wise thing on his part to follow the coach.

He did not wish Gabrielle to know this, so started half an hour after the departure of the coach and kept back in the rear to just where he could keep it in sight.

He had gone alone, for he felt that if the outlaws attempted to halt Racket Rube he could, with a shout, dash into view and set them to flight, as they would suppose he was followed by his men.

Tuen too he hoped to come upon Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men somewhere upon the trail.

Captain DeLong also had another desire in going alone.

He was most anxious to meet the outlaw chief, and hoped that he might do so, for he thought that he might induce him to depart from the frontier and restore to Gabrielle Garland the jewel-box he had taken.

If the outlaw was really the man who had enlisted as a soldier in his troop, Captain DeLong wished to save his neck for the services he had rendered him.

If argument and urging would send him away, he would do all in his power to that end.

If he was not the Mounted Tramp, then he was sure, if they met, he would know it, and then he would offer no favors nor ask any, and most gladly would he be the captor of Black Horse Bill, or his slayer, and thus solve the mystery hanging over the man.

The coach halted on Crow's Roost for a talk with Dashing Charlie, and the captain came to a standstill too.

But when it rolled on once more, Captain DeLong rode forward and came upon Dashing Charlie standing in the trail like a man in a quandary.

"Ho, Charlie, you look puzzled," called out the officer, as he rode toward him.

"I am, captain, for I am as blind as an owl in the sunshine."

"What is the matter, scout?"

"Well, sir, there is not the trace of a trail to show how those outlaws came to this spot or left it."

"Here is where the coach was held up then?"

"Yes, sir, and there are the tracks of the coach and team, and also the trail of Black Horse Bill."

"You see it came from among those rocks and it goes back there."

"And his men?"

"There is where Racket Rube said some of the men were in hiding, and here is the place of ambush of the others, but I cannot, nor can any of my men discover the slightest trace of their coming and going."

"It is not like you to give it up, Dashing Charlie."

"I have not given it up, sir, for I shall camp here to-morrow also, and then go upon the hunt for the outlaws; but until I go, I shall keep

every man on his hands and knees and nose to the ground working on that trail."

"Well, I shall go on to the station and remain to-night, and return to-morrow, and if you leave before I come along on my way back, leave me a note in the trail, telling me if you have made any discovery."

"I will scout along the trail eastward, sir, so will meet you, as I will not leave here before noon, unless I make some discovery to call me away, and in that case, sir, I will leave a note for you, on a stick here in the trail."

Captain DeLong now rode on after the coach, and soon came to Mountain Spring, where he quickly discovered the placard upon the tree, offering the reward for Gabrielle's jewel-box.

"Poor girl! Eloise says that it contained the miniature of the young man whom Gabrielle loved so dearly—yes, and loves yet."

"I would give much to recover it for her," said the captain, and he rode on once more in a musing mood, for he had heard from his wife something of Gabrielle's ill-fated love affair, and which had left its impress upon her.

Half a dozen more of these placards he saw, and they told how much the maiden longed to recover her lost treasures in offering a reward so large.

"The contents of the box, as far as their intrinsic value is concerned, cannot be one-tenth that sum, and if these papers meet the eyes of the outlaws, as they doubtless will, it would not surprise me to have them return the souvenirs to her, for they could arrange it in some way if they wished."

"But I will be on the alert to save her this money by capturing the outlaw, whom I would give a large reward to know whether he is really the Mounted Tramp or not, though I cannot believe that he is from what I have seen of the man, and heard of the doings of the outlaw."

And on his way he went, keeping the coach at a distance so as to catch sight of it every once in a while, until at last he reached the station at sunset, which was the end of Racket Rube's run.

When he rode up to the little tavern where he was to remain all night, for beyond that he did not dread an attack on the coach by the outlaws, Racket Rube was surprised at his coming and greeted him warmly.

The two had a long talk together that evening, and the next morning early the captain started alone upon his return over the trail, for Racket Rube did not start back for a couple of days.

Arriving at the spot where he had parted with Dashing Charlie the day before, he found on a stick stuck up in the trail a slip of paper upon which was written:

"CAPTAIN DELONG:—

"Could not find the slightest clew, so have gone on a hunt elsewhere. DASHING CHARLIE."

And as Captain DeLong raised his eyes from the paper, they looked into the muzzle of a rifle held in the hands of Black Horse Bill.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DESERTER.

CAPTAIN ARNER DELONG was as brave a man as ever wore shoulder-straps, and he possessed an iron nerve.

He was on a trail hoping to meet the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill, and yet, when he did meet him, for the first time in his life he felt a thrill that was akin to fear.

He had not wanted to meet the outlaw just as he did then.

Had the situation been reversed, he would have been content.

Just as he raised his eyes from the little slip of paper, upon which Dashing Charlie had given up his search on the Crow's Roost Range for the outlaws' trail, he saw before him, leaning over a rock upon which his arms and rifle rested, the face and shoulders of Black Horse Bill.

There was no mistaking that bearded face, and the long hair and black sombrero, or the eyes that met his with a look that was dangerous.

"You are my prisoner, Captain DeLong, so do not force me to kill you by resisting my demand."

The words were uttered in a threatening manner.

But they broke the spell, for Captain DeLong was as cool as an icicle now, and said:

"I am no fool, sir, to throw my life away without cause."

"You are wise."

"You recognize me, I see?"

"Yes, as one of the most daring, dashing officers of the army."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"How much will it cost me, please, for money is what you want, of course?"

"Well, yes; you read human nature well, I see."

"I always know the face of a villain when I see it, though I confess that I was at first credulous regarding you."

"How do you mean?"

"When told by Dashing Charlie and others that you were Black Horse Bill, the outlaw, I

doubted it, when I knew the noble services you had rendered the Government, and myself personally, not to speak of my men."

"Well, you see they were right, and that you were disappointed in me," sneered the outlaw.

"So it seems, and I am very sorry that it is so."

"And why?"

"Because I had thought better of you."

"We are all liable to err, Captain DeLong, and though I tried to go right, I could not resist temptation, so went wrong again."

"And have gone back to your old evil deeds of murder and robbery?"

"Alas, yes."

"If you care to reform I will take the responsibility of saying to you that it is not yet too late, for I believe I can promise you a pardon for the deeds of good which you have done."

"It is no use, sir, I have chosen the trail—I am to follow."

"And you refuse my offer?"

"Most emphatically I do, sir."

"You will regret it."

"Don't threaten, Captain DeLong, for I have some men lying hidden among these rocks who do not like bearing their chief threatened."

"I am not particular in choosing my language when addressing villains, Sir Thief, but you have then, followers, it seems?"

"A dozen as fine fellows as ever sent a bullet into a heart, cut a throat or robbed a purse."

"I had believed you were alone."

"Oh, no, like yourself, my dear captain, I am no fool."

"You are aware, I suppose, that you killed a young man several days ago at this spot?"

"Oh, yes, and robbed him and the other passengers with him," was the cool rejoinder.

"Do you know who he was?"

"Some attorney, I believe, bearing papers, money and a box of jewels to Miss Gabrielle Garland at the fort."

"You are right, and you killed a man who never wronged you and robbed a young lady."

"He should not have been so fresh, for it cost him his life to make a show of bluffing me while, as for the young lady she is amply able to stand the loss, yes, and far more."

"How do you know this?"

"I have just seen posted up near the spring, a reward offered of ten thousand dollars for the return of that box of jewelry."

"Well?"

"I shall take the reward."

"Ah! you will return the box of jewels?"

"On yes."

"When?"

"Now, if you wish, for the value of its contents are to me not worth over five hundred dollars, while to the one who takes a sentimental view regarding them they are of far greater value."

"They are, then, as you got them?"

"They are."

"And you demand the reward for them?"

"Every dollar offered."

"When can this be arranged?"

"Now."

"I have only a small sum of money with me."

"Well, it is money that I need, and must have."

Captain DeLong was silent for a minute, and then said:

"See here, do you know that you are a deserter from the army, Horner Rockwell?"

"Oh, yes, I do not deny that, for I carry your furlough in my pocket."

"Let me see it," quickly called out Captain DeLong.

But the cunning outlaw said:

"Ho, men, keep the captain covered, and don't let him get any advantage of me."

"Ay, ay, sir," came the response from an unseen outlaw among the rocks.

At once then, as though no longer fearful of the officer, Black Horse Bill strode out from his shelter and advanced on foot toward him, while he took from his pocket a package of papers, and selecting one from the number, handed it up to the captain.

Glancing at it Captain DeLong said, bitterly:

"In the face of this evidence, this furlough, which ends to day, I do not see how I can longer doubt that I have been sadly duped, that you are Black Horse Bill, the outlaw."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OFFICER AND THE OUTLAW.

In response to the words of Captain DeLong, the outlaw smiled.

It was a strange, a wicked smile, and after a moment he said:

"What room had you for doubt, sir?"

"The fact that you told me you were not the outlaw chief, though his counterpart, and that you sought to enter the army as a private, that you might work your way up to honor and rank."

"You denied *in toto* being the outlaw, saying that you were a wanderer, a Mounted Tramp, as it were, whose knowledge of the frontier had given you a chance to render the services which you did."

"You stated that the Indians mistook you for Black Horse Bill, who was their ally, and thus

you had been able to discover their intentions and act for our good, which you unquestionably did do."

"You enlisted in the army, in my troop, under no compulsion to do so, in reality against all urging not to do so, and got the furlough you asked for."

"Now I find you defiant of your enlistment, an outlaw upon the Overland Trail, robbing and murdering at your own devilish will, yes, and even halting me, your captain, upon the highway."

"You are a deserter, Horner Rockwell, adding desertion to your other crimes, and such I will proclaim you upon my return to the fort."

The outlaw listened with almost respectful attention to the words of the officer.

When he had finished he said with one of his wicked smiles:

"Are you sure that you will get back to the fort, Captain DeLong, after uttering such a threat?"

In an instant Captain DeLong had whipped out his revolver and covered the outlaw chief, while he said sternly:

"Now, Black Horse Bill, you are a dead man if you do not surrender!"

Black Horse Bill did not move a muscle of his face, more than to smile.

Thus they stood for several seconds, the officer covering the outlaw with his revolver, as he stood a couple of paces from his horse, and thus gazing into each others' eyes.

Then the chief spoke and said in an unmoved voice:

"Captain DeLong, it is not my intention to take your life."

"You take my life, man?"

"So I said."

"That is good, very, under the circumstances that I have you covered, and if you know anything about me you are aware that I am a good shot!"

"Yes, I have heard so; but, I know that no less than twelve rifles now cover your heart, and I am not in range, you being mounted I on foot, and though I admit that you could kill me you would die on the instant that you pulled trigger."

"I do not believe you."

"If you wish proof, my dear captain, I can have one of my marksmen cut a hole through the top of your hat," and the chief half turned as though about to call out to one of the outlaws to carry out his suggestion, when Captain DeLong remarked carelessly:

"Oh no, I have no doubt but that you are well backed up, and I do feel that it would be madness in me to throw my life away to take yours."

"Then replace your revolver, captain, and let us come to terms, for I have a proposition to make."

"Well, what is it?" and Captain DeLong replaced his revolver in the holster, for he saw the madness of a trial of strength with men in ambush.

"I saw back upon the tree there a reward offered for a certain box of jewelry I took from Miss Garland's agent."

"Along with a large sum in money, and his life in the bargain."

"Oh yes, taking life and gold is my trade, my profession I may say, for I do both artistically."

"Well, about those jewels?" and Captain DeLong could hardly restrain himself from again drawing his weapon upon the outlaw.

"I have them."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"They are intact."

"Yes."

"I wish the reward for them."

"Do you consider it just to thus rob a young lady?"

"She is very rich and will not feel a few thousands."

"Granted, yet think of what you have already robbed her of."

"That is one thing, this reward is another."

"And you wish to return the jewels for the money?"

"I do."

"You trade upon her love of those trinkets from old associations' sake, to rob her?"

"Call it so."

"What is your proposition?"

"You are her guardian, I believe?"

"In a manner, yes—at least her protector, say."

"Then I will return you the jewels for the reward."

"I have not the money, as you must know, all I possess being invested now."

"Your name is good."

The captain hesitated a moment, and then, as a sudden thought struck him, he said:

"I'll tell you what I will do!"

"Yes, sir."

"It would be impossible for Miss Garland to secure you that money under a certain time, or for her to do so, until I had negotiated certain bonds for the cash."

"But if you will take my note for the sum at—well, say at one month's time, I will give it to you, and take the jewels, while at the expira-

tion of the time specified the money will be paid to your order."

"I accept your offer, Captain DeLong, and here are the contents of the box of jewelry, which I now turn over to you," and the outlaw drew the buckskin bag from his pocket and held it up to the view of the officer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE MINUTE MEN.

THE buckskin bag was fearlessly intrusted to the care of the officer by the outlaw, who said:

"You know what the box contained, and you will find all there, for I put them in the bag as a means of carrying them better."

Captain DeLong felt the temptation again swell up strongly within him to try conclusions with the outlaw, but after a second's reflection decided that discretion was the better part of valor, so said, as he examined the contents of the bag:

"Yes, all are here, as far as I heard Miss Garland refer to them."

"Then please write your note, payable to Horner Rockwell, or bearer, properly indorsed by him, the sum of ten thousand dollars' reward, in payment for jewels belonging to Miss Garland, said jewels received—but stay, let me write the note and when I send a written order with it for the money you will recognize my writing."

"See, I am prepared for all emergencies," and he took from a pocket in his belt a small inkstand and pen, with a sheet of paper.

Placing the paper upon a rock he wrote first a list of the contents of the buckskin bag, and below was the note.

"Now, captain, sign the inventory of what the bag contains, and then the note."

He handed the paper and pen to the officer, and held up the inkstand for his use.

Captain DeLong read the note and inventory, and then said:

"Yes, this is all right, and I will sign them."

With this he wrote his autograph twice upon the slip of paper, and then handed it back to the outlaw, who said:

"Thank you, Captain DeLong, this is as good as gold to me."

"Oh, yes, for I would never dishonor my signature, even though given to you; but I thank you for your trust in me, and shall deliver these jewels to Miss Garland."

"Now I will go on my way, with just one piece of advice to you, and that is that you will be surely captured and hanged if you do not cease your deeds of outlawry upon this frontier."

"I may be, Captain DeLong, yet somehow I do not believe that I was born to be hanged."

"We shall see who is the real prophet."

And, with a nod to the outlaw, who saluted him by raising his hat, the officer rode on.

He glanced fixedly among the rocks, first upon one side of the trail and then upon the other, yet did not see the slightest sign of any human being there.

"I have half a mind to charge in among those boulders and see if there is really a man there," muttered the captain.

But he thought better of the impulse, and rode on his way until he turned into the valley at the foot of the hill.

Just then he saw the trail of Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men, and he suddenly drew rein.

"Yes, I will do it," he said, decidedly.

"Charlie and his Minute Men left the Crows' Roost about noon, and they have been gone three hours."

"By hard riding I can overtake them, and we can come back under cover of the darkness and approach the range from both ends, and the outlaws will, if there, be hemmed in."

"They will hardly leave the range to-night, and are doubtless there to stay until Racket Rube's coach returns."

"Yes, it is worth the ride and trouble; so come, Corporal, show what you can do."

With this Corporal pricked up his ears, as though fully understanding the situation, and started upon the trail of Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men at a long, sweeping gallop.

Captain DeLong could follow a trail well, and he saw that the scouts had not been riding fast when they turned into the valley.

The timber then cut off the view from any of the outlaws on the range of Crows' Roost, so that they would not know that he had gone on after the scouts.

There were two ways of reaching the range, one by the trail he was following, and the other by heading the spur and coming upon it by the road he had been traveling when held up by the outlaw chief.

There were upon the other side of the range, leading down from Mountain Spring, another trail that led to the former retreat of the outlaws, but this they would scarcely dare return to.

So, encouraged that he would still find the Black Horse Braves upon the range, or in the vicinity, the officer pressed on as rapidly as he dared push his horse, which was a fine animal, of great speed and staying qualities.

One, two, three hours passed, and the sun was

near the horizon when Captain DeLong at last saw the scouts ahead.

He gave a long, loud call, and they turned quickly, and recognizing him, came dashing quickly back toward where he had halted.

"Come, Dashing Charlie, go back with me and I will explain as we ride along," said the officer, and he wheeled to the rightabout, Dashing Charlie placing himself by his side and the Minute Men following in twos.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MYSTERY.

BACK to the Crows' Roost Range rode Captain DeLong and Dashing Charlie, followed by the Minute Men.

The captain did not spare his horse, for he was anxious to catch the outlaws in the very scene of their evil deeds.

Could this be done, there was a chance that Black Horse Bill would also be taken and his second band wiped out, and this surely would put an end to lawlessness upon that part of the frontier at least.

It would also prevent Gabrielle Garland from being robbed of the large reward she had offered for the stolen souvenirs, for of course the note would be null and void which Captain DeLong had given.

The captain told Dashing Charlie as they rode along all about his being held up and just what had occurred.

"Did you see any one else there, sir, than the outlaw chief?" asked Dashing Charlie.

"No, I did not see any one else."

"I do not believe there were others, sir."

"Oh, yes, Charlie, for I heard their answer to the chief's call."

"And they were on the spot soon after we left, sir?"

"Yes."

"From wherever did they come, sir?"

"That is the mystery we must solve."

"It worries me, Captain DeLong, because I cannot solve it, I assure you, sir; but if they are there, or have left, there must be some trace of their going and coming, though we could not find it before."

"We must do so this time, Charlie, or they will have the laugh on us at the fort."

"Yes, sir; but here is where we divide, and do you not think that I had better divide my men in three parties, for, by riding rapidly, one squad can get around the range and come up by the very trail by which the outlaws would retreat?"

"Yes; I would do so," said Captain DeLong.

The Minute men were halted for a short rest, and supper, and then divided into three squads, one of four scouts under Diamond Dan to circle around the Range and approach by the trail which led to the old retreat of the outlaws.

Kit Kirby was to lead another squad of four men to come up the trail at the other end of Crows' Roost, and Dashing Charlie with the other four, and Captain DeLong to accompany them, were to go the way they had come.

Diamond Dan started off first with his men, having the longest distance to go, and Kit Kirby and his party followed soon after.

Later Dashing Charlie and his men rode on their way, and all were to camp upon the trails leading to the Range until daylight, and then move into position and sweep the rocks and thickets for the outlaws, meeting at Mountain Spring.

Though he was sure his wife would be anxious about his longer stay, Captain DeLong determined to remain and see the affair through.

He had hopes that he could carry back with them Black Horse Bill and his band as prisoners, and could he do this, along with the jewels which he had recovered from the chief, it would be a great feather in his cap, and glory enough for Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men.

It was several hours after nightfall when the scouts got into position and went silently into camp in their various places chosen.

The horses were not staked out, but kept saddled and bridled, ready for instant use, and the men lay down near them to get what rest they could.

Leaning against a tree, half-reclining, and wrapped in his blanket, Captain DeLong slept peacefully, while Dashing Charlie alone and on foot, made a reconnaissance of the Range beyond.

It was not yet dawn when he aroused his men, and said to Captain DeLong:

"The outlaws are camped upon the mountain-top, sir, not far from the Spring."

"Ah! you saw them then?"

"No, sir, but I heard a man's voice singing."

"They were drinking then?"

"Oh, no, sir, the voice, I thought, was the chief's, and it is a splendid one."

"He was singing Annie Laurie."

"A favorite song of mine."

"I should like to have heard him; but what a remarkable man he is, Dashing Charlie."

"He is indeed, sir, and though he deserves hanging, I shall regret to see such a man come to die upon the gallows."

"As I will; but he is too dangerous to run at large."

"He is indeed, sir; but are you sure that he is the Mounted Tramp?"

"I was true to my belief in that man, Dashing Charlie, until I met the outlaw chief face to face."

"Then I could no longer doubt, for he admits being Horner Rockwell, says that he deserted, and carries the furlough I gave him."

"Then there can be no room for doubt, sir."

"Shall we move, sir?"

"Yes."

And on the scouts went up toward the Range.

Just at sunrise they reached the summit, and an hour after the three squads of Minute Men met at the Mountain Spring.

But not an outlaw had been seen, nor was there the trace of a trail visible where they had come and gone from the spot, and the scouts looked at each other, utterly mystified.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CAPTAIN'S PLOT.

IN vain did the scouts endeavor to find some clue to the mysterious disappearance of the outlaws, or outlaw chief, as the case might be.

They saw the tracks of Captain DeLong's horse, after their own, there were the prints of the feet of the outlaw chief, where he had stood in the trail and talked to the officer for so long a while.

But beyond all was rock, and among the boulders no track was visible.

Strangest of all, there was no trace of a trail leading to and from the boulders.

Certainly the outlaws had not walked to the top of the Range.

If so, the outlaw chief had been mounted when there on the other occasion and no horse track beyond the spot where he held up the coach, could be seen.

Dashing Charlie wore a puzzled look.

He glanced at Captain DeLong, then at the men, each one at a time, but read no hope of a solution of the mystery in the face of any one of them.

"You are at the end of your rope, Charlie!" said Captain DeLong with a smile.

"I most certainly am, sir," was the disconsolate answer.

"And you also give up, Kit?"

"Yes, captain, I acknowledge myself beaten on this trail," responded Kit Kirby.

"How is it with you, Diamond Dan?" and Captain DeLong turned to that scout who replied in his quaint way:

"I knows when I hain't in ther game ter win, cap'n, so I pass."

"Well, boys, have you anything to suggest?"

The question was to the scouts grouped about.

Not a man answered. Several shook their heads in a disconsolate way and others were silent.

"Then let us go into camp, have breakfast, and then, Dashing Charlie, you start upon the trail I turned you back from, and which I now regret having done."

"Don't say that, captain, for this is something to know, which I am glad to know."

"The coach was held up by the outlaws and a young man killed and robbed."

"We seek the spot and we neither know how they came here or left."

"We make a thorough search and give it up, and soon after you are halted right here by the outlaw chief."

"Back we come, advancing from three different directions; I hear a man singing at night right here in this spot, and then we come here to find no man, no trace of a trail."

"Oh, no, sir, I am glad you brought us back, and I am pleased to know how deep this mystery is," and Dashing Charlie spoke earnestly.

"You will, of course, go back on the trail you were on when I called you back, as you said that you had a clue?"

"I have a clue, sir, which may pan out something, though it is nothing more than that if the outlaws have another retreat it is not where the old one was, but in the Range lying between the settlement and the fort, and I thought by going there by night and lying in hiding by day we may discover some secret move on the part of the outlaws which may be useful."

"Charlie?"

"Yes, captain."

"Do you believe you are now under the eyes of the outlaws?"

"That is what I have been thinking."

"Well, I would suggest that we go into camp and quietly make up two dummies."

"Dummies, sir?"

"Yes; dress up two grass figures to look like men, tie them in the saddles of two of your best men, and go on your way to the Divide Range you were heading for when I turned you back."

"The two men whom you thus dismount must lie in hiding here to spy upon the outlaws, and, making any discovery, one must at once start to give you notice, for you can camp two other men, with the horses of those here, at a spot agreed upon, where he can go and soon get a mount."

"The other man can remain here to watch and dog the outlaws."

"What do you say, Dashing Charlie, to my plan?"

"The very thing to be done, sir, and—"

"I speak for one to remain," said Diamond Dan.

"Me, too," called out Curley, a young scout who was very boyish-looking, yet a perfect dare-devil.

"The very two I intended to select for the work," said Dashing Charlie.

The scouts now went into camp, and with leaves, grass and lariats two dummy figures were made, the men giving parts of their wardrobe to carry out the fake.

These were placed upon the horses, stationed down in the timber, and, while Diamond Dan and Curley hid themselves among the rocks, their effigies were tied upon their horses and the party mounted and started off, riding three abreast at a dummy might thus come in between two scouts.

Captain DeLong rode on with the scouts until they reached the valley and there he branched off for the fort, while Dashing Charlie and his men held on for the Divide, as the Range between the fort and the settlement was called.

"Well, we'll see what comes of my little plot to leave those two spies in the Range to watch the outlaws and solve this mystery of their coming and going," said Captain DeLong, and he urged his horse rapidly onward toward the fort, to be suddenly brought to a halt by a loud command and the sight of a rifle covering him.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FORGIVING FOE.

CAPTAIN DeLONG was most decidedly taken aback at the loud command:

"Halt!"

"Hands up, or die!"

He was several miles from Crows' Roost, and no outlaw had ever been seen on the trail between the Range and the fort.

He had parted with Dashing Charlie and his men only a mile back upon the trail, and he was hastening to the fort, fearing his wife in her anxiety would have the general dispatch his troop in search of him.

He came to a sudden halt at the threatening command very wisely obeying also the order to raise his hands, for he did not know whom he had to deal with.

He was just crossing a shallow stream, the banks of which were dotted with boulders from the weight of a ton to many tons, and each one in his immediate neighborhood might have an outlaw behind it.

The man who challenged him was behind a rock, breast high, upon which had sprouted some scrub bushes.

The foliage of these hid the man from view, but out from among the branches peered the barrel of a rifle, and the muzzle was not twenty feet from the heart of Captain DeLong.

"Well, sir, taken at an entire vantage I have obeyed your orders, so what is your sweet will?" said Captain DeLong, while his heart sunk within him at the thought of the bag of jewels he carried belonging to Gabrielle Garland.

The man he addressed quietly stepped from behind the boulder and confronted him, but still keeping his rifle covering his heart.

It was the chief of the Black Horse Bravos.

"Black Horse Bill!" cried the captain, with amazement.

"Yes, Captain DeLong, we meet again, and as before I hold the advantage, for behind every rock near you, before and behind you, is one of my brave fellows."

"What is your will now, Sir Outlaw?" said the officer, sternly.

"I'll tell you in a very few words."

"Do so, for I do not care to be detained."

"You were in a hurry yesterday, and yet you had the time to ride on after Dashing Charlie and his men, to bring them back to entrap me, hoping to thereby escape from having Miss Garland pay the note you gave for her."

"Well?"

"You did not find me?"

"No, you seem to be a kind of mountain will-o'-the-wisp that cannot be grasped."

The outlaw laughed, and replied:

"You will think I am more of one before you ever catch me, Captain DeLong."

"How did you know that I led Dashing Charlie back to the Range?"

"I saw you."

"Where were you?"

"In ambush."

"Where?"

"In the mountain, and I could have killed you had I so wished, or Dashing Charlie, either."

"You appear to be growing more merciful."

"Oh no, I had nothing to gain by killing Dashing Charlie then, for his men outnumbered mine at that time, two to one."

"I see."

"I had everything to lose by killing you, as I hold your note."

"Yes."

"But do you think it was a square deal toward me to try and entrap me as you did?"

"Yes, for I was under no obligation to you."

"I spared your life."

"That is a question if you would not have lost yours, even had you killed me, for I would die hard and try to rid the world of you while dying."

"You are a plucky man, Captain DeLong."

"Thanks for your opinion of me."

"No, you should not have tried to destroy me as you did."

"One must fight the devil with fire, you know."

"And you think treachery toward me is fair?"

"See here, I am under no obligations to you, and it is my duty to crush you where I may and how I can."

"If you consider that I owe you any debt of gratitude let us cancel it one way or the other right here, for you are armed, as I am, and if your men will allow fair play I will meet you."

The outlaw leader laughed at this plucky proposal of the gallant officer, but said:

"Oh, no, you shall not fight me, for the Government needs the services of just such men as you, and I have it not in my heart to kill you."

"It might be the other way."

"Not a bit of it; but I halted you for a purpose."

"Well?"

"You are going to the fort?"

"Granted."

"Dashing Charlie has taken the Range southward?"

"Granted also."

"He is going to make a sweep around toward the Indian country, to see if the red-skins are coming down toward the fort and settlements?"

"Well?"

"He gave up trying to find the trail of my men and myself?"

"Let us say that he did."

"Well, Captain DeLong, I have this to say to you, and I swear it."

"Yes."

"I will forgive you this time for trying to entrap me after my sparing you, but if I discover you again upon the trail after me in person I will capture and hold you until your note is paid and a ransom of the same amount as well."

"If both the note and the ransom are not paid by a certain date, then I shall put you to death."

"Remember, now, I forgive you, but do not hunt me down again."

"Your trail is clear, sir," and Black Horse Bill backed behind the bowlder, leaving Captain DeLong to ride on his way, wondering still more at the strange man he had again met, and who parted from him with a threat.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FRUITLESS ERRAND.

CAPTAIN DELONG felt how powerless he was to act, when he might have to face a dozen foes, and those foes in ambush.

The threat of the outlaw chief did not alarm him in the least.

It simply forewarned him of what he might expect from him in the future.

He had clung to the belief that there were two men, the counterparts of each other.

One, the Mounted Tramp, Horner Rockwell, who had done such splendid service and then enlisted in the army, and the renegade ally of red-skins, Black Horse Bill the outlaw chief.

Now this belief was destroyed, for he had twice met the outlaw, had heard from his own lips that he was the chief of the Black Horse Bravos, and more, that he was the man who had enlisted in the army as Horner Rockwell the Mounted Tramp.

Moreover, he had the furlough signed by himself and approved by the colonel of the regiment and the general commanding to prove that he spoke the truth.

He also had the jewels of Gabrielle Garland as proof that he was the murderer of the young clerk and the outlawed highwayman, Black Horse Bill.

Such thoughts ran through the mind of Captain DeLong as he rode on his way to the fort.

He was half-tempted to go on after Dashing Charlie and his scouts and bring them to the spot where he had just seen the outlaw chief.

He had parted with Dashing Charlie only a mile back on the trail, but by going on to a valley not far away, by a cross-cut he would be able to head the scouts off and bring them back the way he had gone to surprise the outlaws.

As they would hardly remain long there, while he was going directly to the fort, he decided to divide Dashing Charlie's force, sending half of them back the way they had come to head off the retreat of the outlaws toward the Range.

Having come to this decision he dashed away at the full speed of his horse.

Into the valley he turned and riding at a tremendous pace, he held on until he rounded the spur and came full upon Dashing Charlie and his men, just where he was leaving two men with the horses of Diamond Dan and Curley, who had been left as spies in the Crows' Roost Range.

"Well, Charlie, ten minutes after leaving you, as I was crossing Rock Creek I was held

up by Black Horse Bill and his band, and they knew of our hunt for them in the Range.

"He threatened me, if I again took his trail, but I decided to push up the valley, head you off, and then go back and try and hem them in."

"You take half your men and return the way you came, branching off on my trail where I parted from you."

"I will take the rest of your men and push back the way I came, and we will meet at the Rock Creek Ford, say in just an hour and a half."

"Look at your watch to see that we agree as to time."

This Dashing Charlie did, and with five of his men, while the captain had the same number, the start was made on the back trails, the two men to remain in camp, not going, but staying behind.

The pace was a rapid one, and both parties gained their time so that they should reach Rock Creek Ford together.

From the promptness with which he had acted, Captain DeLong hoped that they would find the outlaws still at the ford, or at least between there and the Range, or the valley, in either of which latter events they would strike one of the parties of scouts, and the other hearing the firing could come to the rescue.

The captain rode at a canter, went down the valley until he struck the main stage trail, and then halted to get the scouts ready for a dash and a fight.

There were no fresh tracks showing that the outlaws had gone that way, so they must expect to find them either at the Rock Creek, or have them run upon Dashing Charlie's party.

When girths had been tightened, weapons loosened in the holsters and the horses given a breathing-spell of five minutes, they pushed on once more at a trot.

Soon the Rock Creek Ford came into view, and Captain DeLong, feeling assured that Dashing Charlie, with his usual promptness, was close at hand, went at a gallop, leading the scouts with his sword in hand.

Just as they neared the ford, Dashing Charlie and his men came into view at a run, riding abreast, and with reins in one hand, revolver in the other.

The two squads met at the ford, and then the search began.

But in vain the search, for not an outlaw was in sight, nor could a single trace of a trail be found there.

Not a hoof or foot track could be discovered, and still more mystified at the coming and going of the outlaws without leaving a trail, the scouts continued on their way as before, while the captain, deeply chagrined, went on alone to the fort.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BROKEN DREAM.

CAPTAIN DELONG came in sight of the fort just as a party of cavalry, with a couple of scouts, were about starting out in search of him.

Mrs. DeLong, knowing the dangerous mission he had gone upon, when the time for his return passed, and he did not come, readily obtained permission from General Wesley to send out a searching party.

Lieutenant Wainwright, the general's aide, asked to command the force and was granted permission.

The young officer seemed really disappointed when Captain DeLong put in an appearance, and his services were not brought into requisition.

He at once escorted the captain to headquarters, and, leaving him with the general, went to acquaint Mrs. DeLong with her husband's return.

"He is all safe, Mrs. DeLong, and is with the general."

"I thank you, Lieutenant Wainwright, but you really look disappointed," said Mrs. DeLong with a smile.

"I am."

"Fact is, I wanted to go upon this trip, as I hoped to get a chance at the outlaws, for I have a score to settle with them, you know."

"Yes, indeed, I do know; but I was sorry to see you go, as I do not feel you are yet able to take the saddle and undergo hardships."

"Thank you! yes, I am as good as ever."

"But, my dear Mrs. DeLong, I hoped to catch up with Racket Rube's coach upon its return and also serve as an escort for Miss Garland, for her going has really alarmed me."

"As it has me, Lieutenant Wainwright."

"But then I have hopes that Gabrielle will meet with no accident or misfortune on this dangerous journey."

"Still, she was determined to go, for she wanted her money to invest, as she had decided to do, and having been robbed of the other amount, wished to bring this through herself after she received it from her attorney."

"Then, too, I believe she had a desire to meet this outlaw, Mrs. DeLong."

"How do you mean?"

And Mrs. DeLong appeared slightly provoked at the words of the lieutenant.

"She would not believe that the man Rock-

well and the outlaw were one and the same, and so I believe was determined to see for herself if they were or not."

"Ah, yes, I believe she did have some such idea, and perhaps a desire to appeal to the outlaw for the return of her jewels, or offer a reward for them."

"But I am sure that her strongest motive was to have a talk with her attorney and see that there was given to the mother of that young man who lost his life in her service a certain sum of money for her support."

"There was a great deal, in fact, which Gabrielle wished to talk over with her attorney, since she has decided to remain at the fort with me for an indefinite time, you know."

"But why not have her attorney come here?"

"Simply because his clerk lost his life in coming and Gabrielle would not have the attorney, who is an elderly man, take a trip so full of hardship and danger."

"It is just like her to risk the danger and accept the hardships herself," the lieutenant said, and Mrs. DeLong remarked:

"Yes, just like her, for she is a girl who is devoid of fear and the most self-sacrificing person I ever knew."

"She would have made a splendid soldier, had she been a man."

"Yes, but I am glad that she is what she is."

Mrs. DeLong looked into the honest eyes of the young officer and then said, as she laid her hand gently upon his arm:

"My dear Wainwright, will you let me speak frankly with you?"

"Certainly, Mrs. DeLong, I will be glad if you would do so."

"It is about Gabrielle."

"Yes."

"And yourself?"

"Oh yes."

"It is that I may save you much suffering in the future, Wainwright, that I may prevent untold misery to you to come."

"I am listening, Mrs. DeLong."

"Pardon me for being so frank, but I have seen your growing attachment for Gabrielle, and—"

"Who could help loving her?"

"Very true, but—"

"Why, every man in the fort loves her, old, young, married, single, officers and privates."

Mrs. DeLong laughed, and replied:

"Yes, they love her in a dozen different ways, and she is deserving of it all; but you, my dear friend, love her with the hope of one day winning her love, of making her your wife."

"I confess that I do, Mrs. DeLong."

"She is all in all to me."

"Well, I am sorry for you, for you can never marry Gabrielle Garland."

"Never!"

"No, you never can, but what I tell you is in confidence, remember."

"I shall so regard it, Mrs. DeLong."

"Then let me tell you, that away back in her early girlhood, Gabrielle Garland was secretly married to one whom she loved."

"It was a marriage in fun, it was thought, but it was a legal one, and though it was never made known, she is bound to that man if he is alive, and if he is dead she has vowed most solemnly never to wed another."

The young officer dropped his face in his hands and said softly:

"Alas! my dream of love is broken, forever ended."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PRECAUTION.

ONE of General Wesley's favorite officers was Captain Abner DeLong, and he was becoming very anxious about his overstay of a day, so was most willing to order a party out to search for him, when it was reported that the officer had just come in.

A few moments after Captain DeLong arrived at headquarters, looking weary and haggard after his hard riding and loss of rest.

"Well, DeLong, I am really delighted to see you back, for we were all becoming most anxious about you," said the general.

"My delay was unavoidable, sir, as I will explain."

"Did you see anything of Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men?"

"Oh, yes, sir; I have been with them most of the time."

"Did Racket Rube go through in safety this run?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the outlaws?"

"I have been the one to catch it this time, general."

"You?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not wounded?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Pray explain."

"I have been held up by Black Horse Bill, sir."

"Held up?"

The general looked amazed.

"Yes, sir."

"How?"

"In the cleverest manner, possible, sir, for he had all the advantage."

"When was it?"

"I was held up when I was passing Mountain Spring upon my return on my way back to the fort."

"And where were the scouts?"

"They left at noon for the Divide Range, having failed utterly to find any trace of a trail on Crows' Roost."

"This is remarkable."

"It is a mystery, sir, which none of us could solve, try as we might; and the more of a mystery as a couple of hours after Dashing Charlie and his men left, I was held up there."

"You surprise me."

"I was surprised myself, sir."

"It was Black Horse Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is the outlaw the Mounted Tramp?"

"He is, sir, I am sorry to say."

"You are sure?"

"Well, sir, I have the proof of his word that he was the Mounted Tramp."

"How strange."

"And more, sir, that he was Horner Rockwell who enlisted in my troop."

"I cannot understand it."

"And he had the furlough I gave him, sir."

"Then there is no doubt but that you met the Mounted Tramp; but, was he the outlaw chief?"

"Beyond doubt, sir."

"He admitted it?"

"He gave full admission as to that, sir, and more; he returned the jewels taken from that young clerk that he killed."

"Returned them?"

"Yes, sir."

"It seems that Miss Garland wrote a number of placards offering ten thousand dollars' reward for the return of that box of jewels."

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is an enormous sum."

"It is, sir."

"Why, they were not worth much, I heard."

"Intrinsically, no, sir; but as souvenirs they were worth a great deal to Miss Garland."

"I see."

"She had Racket Rube put one of these rewards at each place where his coach had been held up on the trail."

"Wherever the outlaws were when Dashing Charlie was searching for them, they were at Crows' Roost when I returned, and I rode into an ambush."

"Ah!"

"I was held up by the outlaws, Black Horse Bill came out of cover and confronted me, and we had a long talk together."

"This is remarkable."

"He told me of the reward, and coolly offered to take my note for the amount of the reward."

"Startling."

"It was the coolest proceeding I ever knew, sir, and an ordeal I would not care to pass through often, though I had to stand a little more next time."

"Were you twice held up by him?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am more and more amazed, I assure you, DeLong."

"I gave him the note which he wrote, with an inventory of the things taken from the box, and I signed that also, for he was provided with papers, pen and ink."

"And the jewels?"

"I have them here, sir," and Captain DeLong handed over the buckskin bag to the general.

He looked at it earnestly and then said:

"Well, DeLong, this is a very remarkable experience of yours."

"Let me tell you all of it, sir," and Captain DeLong went on with his story of his going after Dashing Charlie, the return of the scouts, their lack of success, his being held up a second time and the chief's threat at Rock Creek Ford, with a second coming of the Minute Men with no success attending it.

"Now, General Wesley, I am sure, from several things that occurred, that the outlaws know that Miss Garland has gone East, and as a precaution, to protect her upon her return, with the chance of capturing these desperadoes, I am going to ask you if I can take my troop and patrol the trail in my own way?"

"You certainly may do so, DeLong, for it is a precaution which is due to that beautiful girl," was the general's decided answer.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TWO SPIES.

THE two scouts who were left on Crows' Roost Range as spies, made it their first duty to find a secure hiding-place and one which would command a view of the stage trail.

They at last found a spot among the rocks, within a few feet of Mountain Spring.

By climbing up around a pile of rocks they reached a shrub of dwarfed pines with branches sweeping the ground and the thickest of foliage.

They discovered space enough there for their blankets to be spread, and where they could sit wholly sheltered and view up and down the

trail for a quarter of a mile in one direction and half that distance in the other.

They were but a couple of hundred yards off the group of rocks where the outlaws had lain in cover, and in full view of them.

The spring was near for water, and having no horses to look after they could lie quiet by day and at night cook their food and get their canteens filled with water.

One could sleep while the other watched, and there could nothing go by their hiding-place without being seen by them.

To most men the time would have passed monotonously; but they were trained like the Indian to the most perfect patience.

They were trained to watch and wait, to bide their time and hope for success in the end.

If they wished they could play cards, or talk, or one could sleep while the other remained awake.

Thus passed the first day of their watching, and nothing had come in sight except a prowling wolf.

Night came on and with the darkness the moon arose in all its radiance.

The trail was lighted up and the two men, lovers of nature as are all bordermen, sat and talked while they admired the beauty of the scene.

They were chatting pleasantly together in a subdued tone when suddenly the keen eyes of Diamond Dan became riveted upon an object in the trail in the direction of the Outlaw Rocks.

"Say, Pard Curley, I sees somethin'."

"What is it, Dan?"

"Durned if I knows."

"Where?"

"Yonder."

"Yes, I see it too."

"What is it, Curley?"

"I do not know."

"It looks awful white-like."

"Yes."

"Does yer believe in ghosts, Curley?"

"I've tried to convince myself, Diamond Dan, that I do not, that there is no such thing as ghosts."

"But yer can't do it?"

"No."

"No more kin I."

"But what would a departed spirit be prowling around here for, I wonder, if it then really be permitted for the dead to appear in ghostly form on earth again?"

"Ther Lord only knows, Pard Curley, and he did all his instructin' of we poor mortals when he give us that big book ter study; but I disremember any mention in it of ghost stories."

"Well, Dan, whatever it is, it is coming this way."

"Yer is right for a fact, pard."

"Shall I wing him?"

"How does yer know it's a him?"

"That is so."

"Well, shall I wing he, she or it?"

"Yer wouldn't want it on yer conscience ter kill a woman?"

"No, Dan, I wouldn't," was the quick reply.

"If it's a ghost yer wouldn't kill it, for it's already dead."

"That's so, pard."

"I guesses we better look and say nothin'."

"Well, I'll be guided by you, Dan."

"Just so."

"But here it comes and no mistake, and it do hev ther look o' a woman."

"All spirits are supposed to wear flowing robes, Dan."

"That's so; but yer know there has been several women kilt on this trail."

"So I have heard."

"Yes, Black Horse Bill has fired into coaches, and more, he hev kilt a woman or two on purpose, and along this Range of Crows' Roost there be three female graves."

"And a number of men are buried along the ridge as well?"

"Yes, some twenty or more."

"A long list against the outlaws, Dan."

"So it be; but see how white that critter looks in ther moonlight, pard."

"It does look ghostly, Dan, and no mistake."

"See, it is waving its arms."

"So it be, as though it were in suffering, hev'g died afore the time set for it."

"Dan."

"Yes, pard."

"I shall trail that white form."

"What for?"

"Just to note the result."

"Waal!"

"If I can get close to it I will."

"Pard, I believe you knows I hain't skeery."

"I never heard you accused of it, Dan."

"Then, says I, fight man for all you is worth, but don't fool with pilgrims from ther spirit land."

"Good advice, Dan, but I will do no harm in hailing it."

"Maybe not."

"If we do not, we can learn nothing as to its being mortal or ghost."

"Waal, go ahead and I'm with yer in all except killin' ther ghost."

"We cannot kill what is already dead, Dan."

"That's so."

"We were put here to watch this trail, and we must not let even a ghost go by unchallenged."

"I'm with yer, Pard Curley," was the resigned response of Diamond Dan, and the eyes of the two men now became riveted upon the white-robed form coming along the Overland Trail.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DEPARTED SPIRITS.

THE two scouts were differently moved, according to their natures, by the sight of something which neither could understand.

As they were there in hiding, and they did not believe that an outlaw was near, and if near, could not possibly know of their presence and thus attempt a masquerade to frighten them, neither Diamond Dan nor Curley could comprehend the existence of that white-robed form coming toward them.

All men whose lives are passed upon the frontier, among the grand solitudes of the prairies and mountains, like the men who follow the sea, have a vein of superstition in their composition, and neither Diamond Dan nor Curley were exceptions to the rule.

They saw what they could not account for, they believed in the supernatural, and they felt that they were face to face with a being from the Spirit Land.

"I say, Pard Curley, it's awful, hain't it?" whispered Diamond Dan.

"Yes," was the low reply.

The moon shone brightly, and the white form came slowly along the trail, which ran within fifty feet of where the scouts were seated among the rocks.

The ghostly form was clad in a flowing white robe, and waved its hands as it came along.

As it neared the hiding-place of the scouts it paused and seemed to be glancing about it in a weird/sad way.

Then came a low moan, and next a burst of weeping.

"It's a woman's voice, Dan."

"Sure, Curley."

"It must be some poor unfortunate who has lost her way."

"Maybe."

"I shall hail her."

"All right; you do ther talkin'."

"See, she is going to ther graves thar by ther side o' ther trail, and thar is a woman buried thar."

"Maybe she's a-goin' ter crawl inter her grave ag'in."

The white form had halted on the other side of the trail, where were three graves in a row, victims of the outlaws.

"Now, Dan."

"Yes, Curley," and the men spoke in whispers.

Then raising his voice, Curley called out:

"Ho, madam!"

"Are you lost, and can we be of service to you?"

The white form did not move.

It stood just by the woman's grave and seemed not to have heard the voice of the young scout.

Again he repeated his words, and in a louder, clearer tone.

"Them dead in ther graves ought ter hear thet, Curley," whispered Diamond Dan.

But the white-robed form did not start, did not heed the words, but with the hands covering the face passed slowly on down the trail.

"I'll follow, Dan, and overtake her," said Curley, excitedly.

"No yer don't!"

A grip of iron was upon his arm, and Diamond Dan fairly bisped the words:

"No, yer don't do no sich fool thing as that."

"Yer stays right here, Curley."

"What do you fear?"

"Harm to yer fer trallin' a sperit."

"Nonsense!"

"Yer don't go— Lordy! it's a-comin' back."

And back the form came slowly and paused once more at the grave on the side of the trail and in the edge of a pine thicket.

And while they looked, Dan and Curley, it seemed to them that the white form faded away.

"She's gone, Dan."

"Yes, and inter her grave, and I'm a-hopin' she'll stay thar."

The two friends were too excited to sleep, so sat still talking over the strange sight they had witnessed.

After some time, Diamond Dan glanced up and gave a start, a suppressed cry and clutched the arm of the young scout with one hand, while with the other he pointed out into the trail.

There, not far from them, was gliding along an other white-robed form.

It was taller, larger than the other, and as it went along a sound like moaning came to the ears of the two silent scouts.

A halt at the graves across the trail, and then on out of sight down the trail.

"He's gone, Dan."

"Maybe— No, look thar!"

Back came the white form, and it passed away at the graves as the other had done.

A short silence, and soon after a third form appeared.

This one seemed tall and slender and moved rapidly along, going directly to the group of graves.

There it faded from sight into the dark background of the trees.

The two scouts looked at each other in silence, and then Diamond Dan said:

"See here, Curley, I don't like this business."

"Nor I, Dan."

"It appears to be a ghost-walk night, don't it?"

"It does, indeed; but they can't be ghosts."

"What is they then?"

"Outlaws."

"What is they out in that rig fer?"

"To scare us."

"Then I hopes they'll turn in, for they has me about as badly skeered as I wants ter be."

"I don't understand it, Dan."

"I only wish I did."

"Look thar!"

Another white-robed form was in sight, and it was coming down the trail toward the hiding-place of the scouts.

Suddenly, as it came, there burst forth a shriek as though wrung from despairing lips, and following came peal after peal of cries in a woman's voice, calling:

"Help! Help!"

With a bound Diamond Dan was upon his feet, and, seizing his rifle and traps, he bounded away down the rocky hill like a deer, while close upon his heels came Curley, evidently as badly scared as was his brother scout.

CHAPTER XXVII.

STAMPEDED BY GHOSTS.

DASHING CHARLIE and his Minute Men, upon leaving Captain DeLong, kept on their way toward the Divide.

They halted for dinner at the camp where the two men and four horses had been left, and afterward went on their trail for the Ridge, where Dashing Charlie had taken the idea that Black Horse Bill and his new men were making their retreat since their old one had been discovered.

Knowing of the secret pass through the Ridge, and that the Mounted Tramp had been aware of the existence of another, he supposed that the man when driven from one abiding-place would seek refuge in another.

Then too he could be near to make his raids upon the settlement, or the trails, and also to retreat into the Indian country if it became too hot for him where he was.

For this reason Dashing Charlie sought the Ridge, hoping to have the outlaws come there and make them prisoners.

The fact that Captain DeLong had been again held up by the outlaws was not convincing to Dashing Charlie that they did not, or would not, retreat to the Divide.

Back on the Range he had Diamond Dan and Curley to report every movement of the outlaws which they might discover, and he, with his men, could lie in wait in the Divide to pounce upon them if they should come there, and upon reaching camp a man was at once stationed upon a point where he could see and report every approach.

The camp chosen by Dashing Charlie was a good one, for he could reach the fort, the settlements or the Crows' Roost Range upon call, in about the same length of time, while he felt glad that he was with his men between the fort, the settlement and the red-skins.

The men were told to keep close to camp and be ready for an instant's move, and as he had told Captain DeLong just where his encampment would be he knew that if wanted at the fort he could be found.

There was a sentinel placed on duty for the night, and the men turned in early, needing rest.

The moon shone as bright as day, and toward dawn revealed a party of horsemen coming rapidly toward the Divide.

At once the alarm was given and the scouts were in their saddles and ready for work just as the gray of dawn began to steal over the scene.

The horsemen were seen to be four in number as they came on, and they rode rapidly.

"It's Diamond Dan and his party," said the sentinel, calling out to Dashing Charlie.

"All right," and turning to the men about him he continued:

"Diamond Dan has made some important discovery."

"But why did they all come?"

No one could answer this question, and they had to await the arrival of the four men, who seemed to have ridden hard.

A few more minutes, and in the early morn up dashed Diamond Dan, Curley and the other two into the camp, the two who had been left in camp with the horses.

"Ho, Dan, what has gone wrong?" cried Dashing Charlie.

The scout sprung from his horse and in response asked in a way that surprised all who heard him:

"Charlie, do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, Dan, I do not."

"Waal, ef you hed been with Curley and me yer'd hev believed in 'em and no mistake, fer let me tell yer we has seen 'em."

"What did you see, Dan?" asked Dashing Charlie, struck by the earnest manner of the man as well as by the expression upon his face and Curley's, for the sun was now rising over the Ridge and they were plainly visible.

"We seen four ghosts, Charlie."

"Where?"

"At the Range of Crows' Roost."

"When?"

"Afore midnight."

"Ghosts?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense."

"It's no nonsense, for hain't we seen 'em, Curley?"

"We saw white-robed forms whose looks and actions we could not account for," said Curley.

"They were not ghosts."

"Oh, yas, Charlie, they was real stiff, deaders, departed spirits, or I doesn't know one when I sees and hears 'em."

"Did you hear them as well as see them?" asked Dashing Charlie with a smile.

"Yas, they moaned, and one shrieked wuss nor a panther, and me and Curley c'd'n't stand ther pressure no longer, so I just said nuthin' but lighted out in great shape, and when I reached the bottom of ther hill thar were my pard a-pressin' me close."

"We kept on to ther camp whar our horses was and I tell yer it didn't take long ter git mounted and start, and ther boys here come with us without urging."

"I tell yer, Dashing Charlie, we has seen thet this night I doesn't wish ter set eyes on ag'in."

There was no mistaking the earnest manner of Diamond Dan, and the scouts glanced at each other in silence, while Dashing Charlie said:

"They were some of the outlaws trying to frighten you."

"If that was what they was arter, they got in ther work durned fine, for I was thet skeert I hain't got my narves under control yet."

"And what do you say, Curley?"

"It was more than I could account for, Charlie, and I only wish they were outlaws," was the reply.

"Well, as there is no one at the Range, and there must be, I will go back alone, and you, Dan, and Curley, will await me in the camp where the horses were left."

"The rest of the men will remain here under Kit Kirby."

And, after breakfast, Dashing Charlie, accompanied by Diamond Dan and Curley, started upon their return to the Crows' Roost.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RETURN RUN.

RACKET RUBE started out upon his return run with a feeling of great relief.

Gabrielle Garland had gone on further east from his halting-place, and when he mounted his box to start back for the fort, he had not a single passenger, nor any article of value to carry.

This was the cause of his feeling of relief.

"They hain't got nobody ter kill, and I hain't got no treasure along, so they can't do no murder or robbery, that is a durned sure thing."

So Racket Rube gathered up his lines, cracked his whip, and sent his team away in great shape.

He had become more of a hero than ever, and those who saw him start off regarded him with real awe, gazing upon him with admiration as a man who dared face death again and again.

As he neared the Crows' Roost Ridge, he naturally gazed about him with increased watchfulness, and held his reins well in hand for a sudden halt if he got the command to do so.

"Waal, thar they is," he said, suddenly, as he spied a form in the trail ahead of him, and out from among the rocks where the outlaws always appeared came another.

A closer glance, however, and Racket Rube gave a shout, and cried:

"Ho, Charlie, that be you, is it?"

"Waal, I tuk yer fer a outlaw, sart'in."

"No, Rube, I am here hoping to find one outlaw, though."

"Whar's ther boys?"

"Diamond Dan and Curley are half a dozen miles away, at a camp waiting for me, and the rest of the boys are back in the Divide."

"And you are alone?"

"Oh, yas, and have come to hide among the rocks back yonder on the trail all night, for I have a curiosity to see a ghost, Rube."

"See a ghost?" asked Racket Rube, quickly.

"Yes."

"Does yer mean it?"

"I do."

"Waal, I'm thinking if yer hangs out alone on this ridge yer'll see a ghost."

"You used to drive this road by night, did you not?"

"Yas, I did, Charlie, and I hain't doing it any more."

"Well, Rube?"

"Yer can't say I is skeered o' any danger I

has ter meet in ther daytime, and I hain't afeerd o' driving ther trail by night, dangerous as it is; but I don't do it by night when I sees things I can't account for."

"You have seen strange things at night then, on this trail, Racket Rube?"

"I has, and often."

"I knows what a man and a gun is, and I'll face 'em, but durned if I likes seeing silent specters which jist look at yer in a dead kind of way, hain't perlite enough ter answer a question, and appears to be out for a midnight airing from ther graves."

"No, Charlie, I hain't stuck on ghosts a leetle bit."

"Well, Rube, I will stay here one night at least, hoping to see the ghosts you speak of and which Diamond Dan and Curley say they saw."

"They seen 'em, too?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I don't want to see no more."

"Has yer any word for ther fort, Charlie?"

"Yes; please say to the general that I have my main force in the Divide, and two men with in easy range of Crows' Roost, where I have taken up my camp for a few days."

"I'll do it, Charlie; but let me tell yer ter keep a bright lookout for my coming next time, as I'll doubtless fetch thet pretty leddy, Miss Garland, along on her way back to ther fort; but if not, then ther trip after."

"I'll be on the alert, Rube, you may be sure."

With this Racket Rube drove on his way.

He passed on down the hill and had drawn up to a slow pace to cross Rock Creek, where he always watered his team, when he was suddenly confronted by the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill, who came out from among the bowlders.

"I say, Rube, who have you along this run?" asked the outlaw in an easy way as he approached, his revolver in hand.

"Not a durned soul, durn yer."

"That is bad, for I expected you would have a rich haul for me."

"You expected wrong, Black Heart Bill, as yer oughter ter be named."

"Hal hal hal! Good that, very."

"I feel complimented, for the name does suit me."

"But are you lying about having an empty hearse?"

"Yer has eyes."

"Then I will use them," and the robber sprung upon the step and looked into the coach.

"You did tell the truth; but now what have you of value along?"

"Not a dollar, for I travels empty and poor this run, and I'm glad of it."

"Well, I suppose I must allow you to go this time; but it won't do to fool me too often."

"Yer ought ter hev been with yer man back on Crows' Roost, for he got a thousand or so I had along."

The outlaw started and Racket Rube saw it.

He had ventured a lie to mark its effect upon the outlaw.

Moreover he wished to send Black Horse Bill back to Crows' Roost and have him come under range of Dashing Charlie's rifle, for the driver was becoming more and more convinced that the outlaw chief was carrying on his robberies alone, or had at the most, but a couple of followers.

If they went to the Roost then he was sure Dashing Charlie would render a good account of himself, even if they were two or three to one.

For this reason he said what he did, and he smiled inwardly when he saw how eagerly the outlaw chief caught at the bait on his hook, that a rival road-agent was upon the trail.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RUBE RACKETT'S STRATEGY.

"WHAT! do you mean that a man held you up on Crows' Roost Range?" quickly asked the outlaw chief, his face revealing his intense surprise at the well-told lie of the driver.

"Yer knows I was held up," sneered Rube.

"I gave no such orders."

"Waal, yer men acted without orders, then."

"How many were there?"

"I seen but one."

"One man held up your coach?"

"Hain't one man enough, when he has a gun p'inted at yer heart and gives yer a perlite invitation ter stop?"

"Why, I don't see no one but you now."

"But there are others who have you covered."

"Oh yas, for if I didn't think so I'd try it on with you fer a shooting match, Black Horse Bill."

"You would make a sad mistake."

"That depends upon who would tarn up his gun."

"You, of course."

"Waal, I'm gambling on it I'd be willing ter try yer a round o' sixes ef it wasn't fer them hidin' wolves yer has among ther rocks."

"Come, tell me about this man who held you up."

"What does yer wish ter know?"

"Who he is."

"I didn't l'arn his name."

"What kind of looking man was he?"

"Waal, he resembled you to a very big extent."

"Resembled me?"

"So I said."

Racket Rube saw that the outlaw chief was worried, for his face wore an anxious look.

He glanced about him with some nervousness, and then said:

"Did he have long hair and beard like mine?"

"Waal, now, he did, fer a fact."

"Was he mounted or afoot?"

"He rode a fine black horse with Mexican rig."

"The deuce!"

"I guesses he is."

"You are sure that he was alone?"

"I'm sure I seen no others, but he said they was hiding among the rocks."

"And what did he say to you?"

"He told me," said Racket Rube, with a face as serious as an undertaker's, "that he was acting fer you and would be more than pleased if I would hand over ther mail to him."

"And you did so?"

"Of course, when he asked me perlite."

"What did he get?"

"He opened it with his knife fer a key and glanced over ther letters."

"One was registered, and when he broke the seal he said:

"This is a good haul, for there's about two thousand here."

"And then?"

"He said he would keep ther rest o' ther letters and read 'em at his leisure, for they would help to pass away time, and maybe some of 'em needed answering."

"And he kept the mail-pouch?"

"Fer a fact."

"Where did he hold you up?"

"Right at Mountain Spring."

"And then?"

"He told me ter go on my way, and now I has got this far ter be halted ag'in by you."

"I tell yer, Black Horse Bill, I doesn't half like ther way this trail is being worked by you fellers."

"That is our business, not yours."

"Now go on."

"Thank yer," and Racket Rube chirped to his team of six horses and sent them along at a brisk pace.

His face wore a strange look, and when he got some distance away from the ford, he looked back.

He saw the outlaw chief still standing where he had left him and apparently lost in deep thought.

Then the driver began to laugh to himself.

At first it was a smile, then a chuckle, and at last he broke forth in a burst of hearty laughter when he found he was out of hearing of the outlaw chief.

"Waal! waal! what a gigantic liar I is."

"Now that gerloot caught at thet lie as if it were ther sweetest bait in ther world fer him."

"He actually jumped when I told him I hed been held up."

"Now he'll go to ther Roost, nosin' round fer thet outlaw I said I seen, and fust thing he knows he'll run ag'in' Dashing Charlie and that will mean a picnic."

"If he goes with others it will be all ther same ter Charlie, only I wish I had know'd I were going ter meet ther outlaw and c'u'd hev posted ther scout on ther lie I were going ter tell him."

"But Charlie hain't ther man ter be caught asleep, and when ther outlaw gits thar he'll find him at home ter make him welcome."

"I only wish I c'u'd go back and see ther fun," and Racket Rube again laughed heartily at his strategy, which had so deceived the outlaw chief.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PATROL.

RACKET RUBE reached the fort on time and at once went to headquarters, where he found General Wesley, Captain DeLong and Lieutenant Wainwright together.

"Well, Rube, you are back again I see?" said the general.

"Yes, sir."

"And what have you to report?"

"The captain knows, sir, that I took ther young leddy through safe to ther end o' my run, and I'm expecting she'll come back with me next run, or ther one after."

"Yes, so we believe."

"And I'd like, sir, to see ther trail well guarded ter save her from harm or a fright."

"That is just what shall be done, Racket Rube, for Captain DeLong goes out with his troop to patrol the trail, when you start again."

"I'm awful glad to hear that, sir, for ther sake o' thet sweet young leddy, for ther Bravos is on ther trail continual now."

"Ah! you have seen them again?"

"I has seen ther chief, sir, but whether ther was more around or not I can't say."

"You saw no one else?"

"No, sir, only ther chief."

"Nor heard any one else?"

"Not this time, general; but it strikes me after all, that Black Horse Bill hain't got more than one or two men with him."

"It may be so, Rube; but he is a 'old fellow to take the chances he does."

"Yes, general, and he came walkin' out ter-day, jist as pleasant as you please, when I got ter Rock Creek Ford, and asked me who I had along, and what I had in the way of valuables."

"Then he held you up again to-day at Rock Creek?" asked the general with surprise.

"Yes, sir, and we had a very pleasant talk together, and I sent him off on a fool errand which I hopes has got him kilt by this time."

"What was it?"

"Yer see, I seen Dashing Charlie a-hidin' in ther Outlaw Rocks as I come along."

"You mean Diamond Dan and Curley, Rube."

"No, Cap'n DeLong, I means Dashing Charlie, for Dan and Curley had seen ghosts the night afore and so lighted out, and Dashing Charlie he came to take their place."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"They had seen ghosts, you say, driver?" the general asked.

"Yes, sir."

"What nonsense."

"No, general, for I has seen ghosts on thet same Range, or things I don't know what they is."

"They seen 'em too and skipped, and I don't blame 'em."

"Dashing Charlie come ter watch, and he told me ter tell yer he war thero, and also ter say that he had the Minute Men up in the Divide, while Diamond Dan and Curley were awaiting him near Crows' Roost Range."

"And he is there alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"On the watch?"

"Yes, general, watching for ghosts and outlaws, and ter him it don't make much difference which."

"And what was his object for going there alone?"

"I guess ther men didn't wish ter tackle them things they couldn't understand, sir."

"And what was the errand you sent the outlaw chief upon?"

Racket Rube laughed at the remembrance, and then told the general and the others the story he had palmed off upon Black Horse Bill.

"If he goes there then he will have trouble with Dashing Charlie, that is certain; but DeLong, I only wish you had time to reach the Roost before night, for it might be that the scout needs aid, and that the outlaws could be hemmed in."

"I will go at once, general, if you wish me to do so."

"No, wait until later and start as you intended, leaving a force at Rock Creek, another in the valley at the foot of the Range, a third at Outlaw Rocks, and three other platoons scattered along the trail from the Mountain Spring to the end of Racket Rube's run."

"Then you can have Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men in hiding along the trail where the scout may deem it best for them to be, and then, if the coach is held up, Rube, after all these precautions, I'll put another troop out and patrol the whole distance as far as you go."

"I don't see how they can hold me up, sir, with the men you have now ordered on patrol duty, and I am glad of it for Miss Garland's sake, sir."

"Yes, she must be protected upon her return, at all events."

"How would it do to send a force in the coach?"

"Bad, sir, for if the outlaws are in numbers, they lie in ambush and would riddle the coach if they thought a trap was set for them, and Miss Garland might be killed."

"Very true; that fellow would fire upon it, I know."

"He would, sir, as he has done before, and you know there are already two graves along the trail with women in them, and one of a child."

"Yes, he is merciless to women and children as well as to men; but having seen him more closely, do you say that he is the Mounted Tramp?"

"I wish I could say he is not, sir, but I must say I thinks he is ther Mounted Tramp," was Racket Rube's response.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SHOT IN THE MOONLIGHT.

DASHING CHARLIE could not but feel, brave as he was, some anxiety for the night to come on and what it would reveal to him.

He watched Racket Rube drive away, and then sought the spot where Diamond Dan and Curley had camped and from which place they had seen the white-robed forms appear.

On the same spot he spread his blankets and lay down to rest and to think.

Diamond Dan and Curley, with his horse, were some distance away, even beyond hearing of a rifle-shot.

The coach was rapidly going on its way, and Dashing Charlie, accustomed as he was to being alone, soon realized how great was the solitude about him.

"This will be a lonely place to-night all alone, and yet it never struck me before in that light,

only since Diamond Dan and Curley's story about seeing ghosts."

"But those ghosts I wish to see also, so here I shall remain, and if I do see them, why, I will—well, I don't know yet just what I will do until the time comes for me to act."

So mused Dashing Charlie, and then he settled himself on his blanket to rest, knowing that he would have to keep watch during the night.

He knew that the slightest footfall in the trail would awaken him, too, and that no one could pass along and not arouse him, for he possessed an instinct, as do men trained as he was, that tells them of danger when it is near, though it cannot be seen or heard.

The afternoon passed away and Dashing Charlie slept serenely.

Then he went back to his post, doubled up his blankets and sat down to watch and wait just as the moon began to rise.

"I've heard that graveyards yawn and ghosts walk just at midnight, and I guess those who haunt the Overland Trails will not be different from the others, and that means a wait of some hours."

"But I am ready for ghost, goldin or outlaw."

"It is certainly a most beautiful night, and so bright that I could recognize a man from here passing along the trail there."

"Diamond Dan and Curley surely saw something with a supernatural look to it, or they would never have deserted their post."

"Yonder in the border of that dark pine thicket are the graves of some of Black Horse Bill's victims, and one grave holds a w man, to his greatest infamy be it said."

"I believe I am getting sleepy, but I must keep awake, or I shall miss the ghosts and that would never do."

So the brave scout mused to himself, and the time passed on.

The moon shone down from a cloudless sky, and being behind the scout, lighted up the scene in his front as bright as twilight.

In front of him, a hundred feet away, was the group of graves, where the two scouts the night before had seen the white-robed forms disappear.

Upon these graves in the edge of the pines, Dashing Charlie kept his eyes riveted, as though expecting to see the ghostly forms rise from the earth and appear before him.

Suddenly he turned his head, as from an instinctive impulse, and up the trail toward Outlaw Rocks, he saw a form clad in snowy white.

It was coming down the trail at a slow, gliding step, directly toward him.

At once he was upon the *qui vive*.

He rubbed his eyes to see the better.

Then he shook himself to see if he was awake.

"I am awake, there is no doubt of that."

"But do my eyes deceive me, or is there a white form coming down the trail?"

"Perhaps it is conjured up by my imaginings."

Nearer and nearer came the white-robed form with the same gliding motion, and as it came on it waved its arms wildly.

But no sound came from it, only that despairing waving of the arms.

Dashing Charlie held his rifle in his hands ready for use.

He was not afraid, but amazed, bewildered.

Nearer and nearer came the form, to suddenly halt just before him.

"It is a woman."

The words broke from his lips in a hoarse whisper.

He saw a mass of long hair hanging far down the back, a slender form and a white robe.

The face seemed snowy white in the moonlight, and the gaze of the scout was riveted upon it.

Again the form moved forward and then quickly disappeared in the shadows among the graves, seeming to actually fade away.

The scout drew a long breath of relief.

"It was a woman, and I would not fire on her," he muttered.

Soon after he glanced up the trail, and again a white-robed form was in view.

It was larger than the other, taller, and came along at a more rapid step.

"Now, if he refuses to obey my command, I shall fire," said the scout, and he got his rifle ready.

The form came nearer and halted as the other had done in the trail, plainly revealed to the scout.

Suddenly, loud, clear and determined rung out the words:

"Hands up, or I fire!"

The white form did not move, and again the command was repeated.

Still no answer.

Still no movement.

"Now I fire," said Dashing Charlie, and the shot rung out clear on the night air.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MISS.

THERE was a puff of smoke floating for an instant before the vision of the scout, after his shot, and then the balmy breeze wafted it away.

His first look was at the trail.

He expected to see a white form lying there. But he was mistaken. There was no form there. That is, there was no form lying in the trail.

Instead, the ghostly apparition was gliding rapidly away, directly for the group of graves.

Dashing Charlie had perfect confidence in his aim.

He had taken deliberate aim, and had rested his rifle upon the rock in front of him.

If there was any blurring of his eyes, any tremor of the finger that had touched the trigger, any quiver of the shoulder against which the butt of his rifle rested, because he was aiming at an unknown object, Dashing Charlie did not know it.

Had it been a shot on the wing he would have been sure of its being deadly.

Yet now the object he had fired upon did not halt.

Nay more, it was gliding away as though unharmed.

Dashing Charlie was not a man to be beaten.

He had no woman to deal with, as he was sure the first apparition had been, and he would fire again.

"Halt!"

"Halt or take the consequences," he cried in a voice that could be heard the eighth of a mile.

But the ghostly form moved on as rapidly as before.

Again the rifle was leveled, and rested upon the rock.

The eye ran along the sights and took deadly aim.

The scout felt that his nerves were as firm as the rock upon which his rifle rested.

Then the trigger was touched, with the bullet aimed directly at the back of the form.

The report followed, the puff of smoke floated away and the white form had halted.

It raised one arm slowly, the hand pointed directly at the scout, and there seemed in the movement a reproach conveyed.

Then the form once more glided on and the next instant had disappeared, seeming to fade away in the shadows of the pines, just as Dashing Charlie sent another shot hurtling after it.

Quick as a flash now, with his revolvers in hand Dashing Charlie leaped down the rocks and ran out into the trail.

There he halted an instant and then he bounded toward the thicket, halting at the group of graves.

All was silence there.

The shots had silenced the night insects as well as the howling of a wolf not far away.

The scout stood in silence listening with rapt attention.

But no word came to his ears.

All was as silent now as the graves at his feet.

"I missed my aim."

"I, Dashing Charlie, missed three shots, two with a rest on the rocks and at close range."

"What does it mean?"

"It surely cannot mean that I fired at that which cannot be killed."

"It was no ghost most certainly, for such things cannot be."

"No, the dead cannot come back to earth again, even in spirit form."

"That was a man surely, masquerading as a ghost."

"But why?"

"Why did I miss him?"

"I do not wonder that Diamond Dan and Curley ran away."

"I am tempted to do the same thing now, for I do not understand what it was that I fired at."

"I do not comprehend why I missed that form."

"It was a miss, yes, three straight misses, for if not the body would be here."

"I will go into the pines and look about as well as I can, but they are so thick it is dark in there as a moonless night."

He boldly entered the pines now, though with the greatest caution.

He had not penetrated far before he saw that all was blackness ahead of him.

He turned, and beyond the graves all was brightness, for the moonlight was there.

He retraced his steps and again halted by the graves.

There he stood for a minute or more lost in reverie.

As he stood there he heard a sound which caused him to place his hand to his ear and listen.

"Some one is coming."

"Yes, they are ascending the hill and I hear the sound of hoofs distinctly."

"There are many of them too."

"I must have a care, for Black Horse Bill may after all have a band and the outlaws may be abroad in numbers too many for me."

"I will back to my hiding-place again."

"I would rather they would be men, outlaws, and half a dozen of them, than what I just fired upon, and missed."

With this he ran back to his hiding-place among the rocks, reloaded his rifle and waited.

The sounds of hoofs grew louder and louder,

and in a few minutes more there dashed into view a party of horsemen riding like the wind along the trail.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CAMPING ON THE TRAIL.

IN obedience to the orders of General Wesley, Captain DeLong started out with his troop to patrol the Overland just after leaving headquarters.

He did not take any scouts along, as he expected from what Racket Rube had said to find Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men on the trail.

Arriving at Rock Creek Ford, he left in camp there a sergeant and six men.

Then he pressed on to the valley, and at the base of the mountains, where the trail divided to the right and left as well as holding on to the fort, a sergeant and eight men were left to go into camp.

Continuing on up the steep trail the captain, who was riding well ahead of his men, along with Lieutenant Wainwright, who had been allowed to come along as an aide, he having earnestly requested it, suddenly drew rein and said:

"Was not that a shot?"

"I thought so, sir," answered the lieutenant.

Again came the sound, far in the distance, from about where Outlaw Rocks was located.

"Come, men, we must push ahead with all speed, for Dashing Charlie is getting into trouble with those ghosts Racket Rube spoke of."

"Come!"

Away went the captain and lieutenant, and the officer in charge of the troop following in the rear urged them on.

Up the hill they thundered at a great pace, and when the summit was reached formed in fours and pressed on.

A few minutes more, and suddenly there came a loud shout followed by the words:

"Bravo, Boys in Blue!"

At the same instant Dashing Charlie came from his retreat among the rocks and approached Captain DeLong who, recognizing him in the moonlight, called out:

"Ho, Dashing Charlie, who fired those shots awhile ago?"

"I did, sir."

"What game were you after?"

"Ghosts."

"What do you mean, Dashing Charlie?"

"Well, sir, my two best men, as you know, who were left here, sir, deserted on seeing ghosts prowling along the trail, and I took their place to get a look at the white-robed prowlers."

"And did you see anything?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was it?"

"I saw what appeared to be a feminine ghost first, but I passed on her and she flitted out of sight over there among those graves."

"Then a masculine spirit came prowling along, and when I hailed and demanded him to surrender, he paid no attention to my command, so I fired."

"You fired?"

"Yes, sir; for I supposed I could do no more than kill an outlaw."

"I see."

"But where is your game?"

"That is just what I would like to know, sir, for, though I fired at him from a rest, he paid no attention to the shot."

"Can this be possible?"

"It is, sir, and he stood just here where I now stand, and I was not sixty feet away."

"It is strange that you missed him."

"I missed him a second time, sir, as he moved away, and again just as he reached the graves yonder I fired a third shot, and with the same result."

"I then ran over to the graves, but could not find him, dead or alive, in spirit or body, and hearing you coming I sought shelter, sir."

"Dashing Charlie, I am out on this trail to solve the mystery that hangs over the doings of these outlaws, and I am on it to stay," said the captain, in his decided way, and which his men knew meant so much.

Then turning to Dashing Charlie, he continued:

"I am to patrol the trail, Emmett, all along the run of Racket Rube."

"I have left men at Rock Creek, others at the branching of the valley trails, and I will send others on to camp at different points along the Overland."

"This being the apparent central position of the outlaws, I shall remain here and wish you to be with me, and several of your men, too, for I shall keep but a platoon of my troop here, and Lieutenant Wainwright will also remain, for from this point we can act the more readily."

"So I think, sir, and we can camp at Mountain Spring, and I will go after Diamond Dan and Curley while you go into camp with your troop, sir."

"You will soon return?"

"Yes, sir, for I wish to be yonder at those graves when light comes, for I have a curiosity to see what kind of a trail a ghost leaves," and borrowing a horse from one of the men, Dash-

ing Charlie set off for the camp of Diamond Dan and Curley.

But just at daybreak he returned with the two scouts, who were glad to know they were to have so much company in the hunt for ghosts and outlaws.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WAITING.

RACKET RUBE drove back over the trail which had proven so dangerous to both himself and his passengers, with the air of a man who had nothing to fear, as he knew that stretched out for fifty miles were a number of gallant troopers, ready to protect him from the outlaws.

He smiled grimly as he saw them at Rock Creek, nodded pleasantly as he drove by the party at the Valley Trails, and when he passed Outlaw Rocks, drew rein for a talk with Captain DeLong and Dashing Charlie, who halted him.

"I don't mind this kind of holding up, sir," he said, as Captain DeLong tossed a cigar up to him.

"No one came out with you, Rube?"

"Not a soul, sir, for all is scared now, unless it be ther plucky young leddy, Miss Garland."

"You expect her to return with you, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, or leastwise that is about what she said, that it would be this trip or the next."

"And there will be no holding up, Rube, either this trip or the next, for we have camped on the trail to catch those outlaws."

"May you do it, sir, is ther prayer I'd say if I thought they'd listen to me up there."

"Your prayers will go a long way further, Racket Rube, than will those of many who are constantly upon their knees."

"Yer think so, cap'n?"

"Yes, for I judge a man by his actions, not by his prayers."

"But be sure and relieve Miss Garland's mind at once, by telling her that my troop is patrolling the trail."

"I'll do it, sir," and turning to Dashing Charlie, he continued:

"Waal, Dashing Charlie, has yer tackled a ghost yet?"

"Yes, Rube, I shot at one three times last night."

"Yer shot at one?"

"Yes."

"At a ghost?"

"Yes, at what I saw, and more, I missed him."

"I shouldn't wonder, Pard Charlie; but yer has more grit than I thought any man could own ter shoot at a sperit."

"I tried to make a ghost of him, Racket Rube, for I don't believe in ghosts, though I admit what I saw last night puzzles me."

"Waal, Pard Charlie, I wishes yer no ill luck for firin' on what I believes were a sperit, and I only hopes yer'll git hold of them outlaws who has been sich a bother to you all."

"And to you as well, Rube," the captain said with a laugh, as the coach went on its way.

All along the trail Racket Rube had evidence that he was to be protected most thoroughly on the way back when he expected to have Gabrielle Garland as a passenger.

"She needn't fear robbery this time, that's sart'in, he said as he rolled into the station at the end of his run, and had seen how well the whole trail was patrolled."

It was two days before the coach started back, and as the time for the arrival of the stage from the East drew near, Racket Rube grew a little anxious.

He was a little afraid that something might delay the coming of Gabrielle and that General Wesley would have to call the troops off the trail, not being able to keep them encamped there so long.

This thought troubled him, for he did not care for himself how soon the troops left, only for the maiden.

"As for me, I guesses they won't kill me, especially as I has l'arned a leetle mite o' wisdom of late; but I'd hate ter have them hold up ther old huss when ther pretty leddy is along, and especially ter rob her again, for I thinks they has done her harm enough."

So Racket Rube mused while waiting for the coming of the coach which he hoped most sincerely brought Gabrielle Garland as a passenger.

As the run of Racket Rube was made in the daytime, the passengers coming in on the coach from the eastward always stayed all night at the station, which was a junction for the lines running to different points westward.

Racket Rube had engaged the best room in the little tavern for Gabrielle, and had seen to it himself that all in it was clean and the very best that frontier station could afford.

He had gathered a large bouquet of wild-flowers and placed them in the room, and had shot some game for the supper and breakfast of the fair passenger.

If she did not come then he would simply have the same thing to do over upon his return to the station.

It was nearing sunset when the stage-born

was neared down the valley, and soon after the coach rolled into view, Bobby Moore on the box.

Racket Rube could hardly restrain himself from giving a shout of joy when he beheld upon the box by the side of Bobby Moore, a lady passenger.

Of course it could be no one else than Gabrielle Garland.

CHAPTER XXXV. A MAGIC SPELL.

THE passenger noted by the side of Bobby Moore was indeed Gabrielle Garland.

She was neatly dressed in a new suit, a slouch hat and plume, and looked as though she had enjoyed her trip.

She was handed down from the box by Racket Rube, with whom she shook hands most warmly and then quickly asked:

"Have you any news from the fort, Racket Rube?"

"All well there, miss, and sent the'r love, with ther hope o' seeing you soon."

"Thank you; but do not mind me, as I can take care of myself while you help this old gentleman who is quite feeble," and Gabrielle turned to the coach where an old man was just alighting, several others having already left the coach.

The old man was stooping from age, and his hair and beard were snow-white.

He was dressed in the gray suit and hat of a Quaker, and wore blue glasses, as though his eyes were affected by the bright light.

He leaned heavily upon a gold-headed cane, and seemed very feeble.

"Thank thee, sir, thank thee," he said in a tremulous voice, as Racket Rube aided him toward the tavern.

The driver was very kind to him, got him a rocking-chair, while he went to look up a room for him and to show Gabrielle to her quarters.

"You dear, good fellow, how good you are," said Gabrielle, as she beheld her room adorned with flowers, and she felt touched by the kindness of the gallant borderman.

"You deserves it all, miss, and more too."

"But now I'll go and look after the old gent."

"Please do so, for, though I only met him this morning, I feel for him taking such a long trip, for he told me he had to stop over at every station for a day or two."

"Is he going on with me, miss?"

"Yes, if he is able to do so, for he is on his way to the fort to see his son, who is a soldier there."

"I'll take care of him, never fear."

"Now you'll have a good supper, for I got some game fer yer, and then yer better git all ther sleep yer kin, fer yer know we starts with ther sun in ther morning."

"I'll be ready, Rube, and I thank you; but, is there any news at the fort?"

"Well, miss, maybe I ought not ter tell yer, not bein' told ter do so, but ther cap'n has got yer jewels and things ther outlaws tuk from ther young men they kilt."

"Thank God!"

The words came with a fervency from the lips of the maiden that told Racket Rube how glad she was to get them back.

Then the driver went off to look to the comfort of the old gentleman, and he got for him the next best room in the tavern, and said he would have his supper sent to him there, which he did.

When Gabrielle went in to supper she sent for Racket Rube to join her at her table, and this he did, though he admitted afterward that he had never been so confused in his life.

"Boys," he said, in telling of it, "I upset a glass of water inter my plate fust thing, and soon arter I got choked on a piece of antelope steak."

"Waal, ther meat jist stood out on my face like blisters, and next I oversot the hot coffee in my lap and that made me bite my tongue ter keep from cursin' ther whole outfit from Glory to Hallelujah."

"I tell yer, pards, it war ther most miserable time I ever 'sperienced in all my born days."

But Gabrielle did not notice his confusion, talked on pleasantly the while, praised the antelope-steak and the birds, and after supper consented to sing for the people, if Rube could get her a guitar, for a request, which he had started in motion, had come in for her to do so.

Seated out in the moonlight after supper, with a guitar which a miner had ridden three miles to get, Gabrielle Garland sung for the crowd of men gathered about her.

Her voice was full of melody, sympathetic and exquisitely toned, and it went to every heart, even the crudest of those present.

She did not make the attempt to display her splendid knowledge of music by indulging in classical songs without tune, but sung instead the simplest of ballads, and ending with "Home Sweet Home," brought tears to eyes which had not wept since childhood days.

Rube was more than charmed, for he regarded it all as his entertainment, and he escorted Gabrielle back to her room with the air of a conquering hero.

The ovation given her was one for her never to forget, for rough, bearded men, with hands as hard as iron, pressed forward surely to shake hands with her, and one voice the thoughts of many when he said:

"I'll be better for this night, miss, and may God bless you forever."

"Amen!" came in a chorus of many voices which showed that in spite of their wild lives there were many present who had not forgotten the prayers of long ago.

The old man, Gabrielle's fellow-passenger, had been sitting by his window, the moonlight streaming full in upon his silvery hair and beard, and listening in silence, a fitting background to the picture of the beautiful girl and the wild spirits about her.

And that night there was less noise in the tavern than was ever known before, and the bar-room was all but deserted long before midnight, for the men crept away to their humble quarters, not caring to break the charm, to sever the spell upon them through the hearing of those old songs that connected them with the past.

CHAPTER XXXVI. ON THE HOME TRAIL.

THE stage horn awoke Gabrielle Garland from a sound sleep just at dawn, and half an hour after she sat down to a very tempting breakfast.

When she went out to the coach the old gentleman was there, and said that he had determined to go on through without longer rest.

"I will not ask it now, my dear young lady, for in the early morning a ride on the box will charm you; but after awhile will you not ride with me in the coach, for I wish to talk with you, for you sung songs last night that carry me back to my boyhood?"

"I will, with pleasure, sir, for we seem to be the only passengers."

"The sun will be warm in a couple of hours, and then I will be glad to change from the box to a seat inside."

With this Gabrielle mounted to a seat alongside of Racket Rube, who already had his reins in hand, and Bobby Moore did the polite thing to assist her.

There was a larger crowd than usual to see the coach start, and many were the words of praise regarding the courage of the beautiful girl, for not a word had Racket Rube said to any one about the trail being patrolled.

When all was ready Racket Rube cried out:

"Let go!"

The stableboys jumped aside from the heads of the leaders, and the team of six splendid horses went off at a rattling pace, while cheer after cheer went up from the crowd.

When once well started Racket Rube placed his bugle to his lips and began to wind out notes in a manner that showed he was an artist in his way.

At last the village was left out of sight, the silver bugle was laid aside, the team was drawn down to a good, steady, traveling gait, and the coach was on its way to run the dangerous gantlet before it.

"You have no idea, Racket Rube, how much pleasure you have given me in saying that my jewel-box was returned."

"Yas, miss, the captain got it."

"Captain DeLong, of course?"

"Yas, miss."

"How did he do it?"

"He was held up by the outlaw chief, miss, and then they come to a settlement on the reward you offered."

"It was cheap at any price to me, Rube; but did Captain DeLong pay that large sum of money for me?"

"Well, he'll tell yer, miss, just how it all was, for we'll meet him on ther trail."

"Ah! before we reach the fort?"

"Yas, miss."

"He is waiting to guard the coach, then?"

"He got ther general ter let him take his troop, miss, and stretch 'em along ther trail."

"How kind of him!"

"And Dashing Charlie is with him, miss, and Diamond Dan, and Curley, and I almost forgot the handsome young lieutenant who likes you so much, miss."

"Who is that?" asked Gabrielle, with perfect innocence, not noting the sly look given her by the driver.

"Lieutenant Wainwright, miss."

"Oh yes, it was kind of him."

"I don't wonder yer didn't know who I meant, miss, when all ther young officers loves yer—yes, and ther old ones, too."

"Oh, Racket Rube! you must not slander the army officers in that way."

"It's ther truth, miss."

"Have you seen or heard anything of the outlaw chief?" suddenly asked Gabrielle, as though willing to change the subject.

"Yas, miss, he has been both seen and heard, only we has him now in a fix; I guesses he won't dare make no more attacks upon ther coach, so yer needn't feel skeery about meetin' him."

"On the contrary from feeling frightened, Racket Rube, I would like to meet him."

"You sh'd like to meet him?" said Rube, in amazement.

"Yas, very much."

"The outlaw?"

"Yas."

"Yer don't mean Black Horse Bill, miss?"

"Yas, I mean Black Horse Bill."

"Lordy, miss, does yer know I'd give my right arm rather than hev him hold up ther coach when you is along."

"You are generous to say so, Racket Rube, and I half suspect that you are the cause of having the trail under patrol."

"No, miss, that was ther capt'n's work, and I only was glad of it."

"Let me explain to you, Racket Rube, that I should like to meet this man, Black Horse Bill, to see if he is really the Mounted Tramp."

"I thought as how he were not, miss, but I has give up now."

"You say that you believe him to be the Mounted Tramp?"

"I does, miss."

"But Captain DeLong does not."

"Yas, miss, he does, since he has been held up twice by him."

"Captain DeLong was twice held up by this outlaw, you say?"

"Yas, miss, for he followed on arter you ter help yer out ef need be, and then he were held up on ther way."

"And robbed?"

"No, miss, but he were held up on his way back, and then 'twas he got yer jewels back from ther outlaw."

"Well, I suppose I shall hear all about it when I reach the fort."

"Yas, miss, yer'll know it all; but here we comes ter whar ther first squad o' sogers be camped," and a minute after Racket Rube drew rein near a thicket, from which now emerged a sergeant and several soldiers, who gave Gabrielle a military salute, for she was called in the fort the "sponsor" of the cavalry regiment to which Captain DeLong's troop belonged.

And from the first patrol on Gabrielle saw that every effort had been made to prevent an attack upon the coach while she was a passenger.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE AGED PASSENGER.

THOUGH Gabrielle Garland would have preferred to ride upon the box all the way, for she was fond of the open air and enjoyed the scenery as well as seeing Racket Rube manipulate the reins, she had not forgotten her promise to the old passenger in the coach.

When therefore they came to the corral station in a valley, where there was a stock-tender and a dozen horses, while the team was being changed for a fresh one, Gabrielle said that she would get into the coach.

She kindly brought the aged passenger a drink of water from the spring, and then entered the coach with the remark:

"Now, sir, I have come to be your fellow-passenger for the rest of the journey."

"It is very good of you, miss, to be bored with the company of an old man."

"Take a seat here with me, and let us talk together."

Gabrielle quietly took a seat on the rear with the old passenger, who began to talk to her in a low, kindly tone.

At last he said with considerable abruptness:

"You are Miss Gabrielle Garland, are you not?"

"I am, sir."

"I heard you so called at the station last night."

"Yas, I am Gabrielle Garland, but I did not know that any one knew the fact except Racket Rube."

"Yas, I knew it, and let me tell you now what perhaps will surprise you greatly."

"Well, sir?"

"I told you that I was going to the fort to see my son who was a soldier."

"Yas, sir."

"That is not my purpose in going there."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yas, I am going there to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yas, Miss Garland."

"May I ask you to explain, please?"

"You had a brother, once, I believe?"

Gabrielle started visibly and her face paled.

After a moment of silence she said:

"Yas, I had a brother once, one of an unfortunate nature who brought only sorrow and suffering upon himself."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Dead, it was told me."

"He was not remembered in your father's will, I believe?"

"My unfortunate brother's career was such, sir, that he weaned himself from the love of his father, yes, and his mother as well, while I was made to feel how wicked was the life he led."

"He was your half-brother, I believe?"

"Yas."

"Your mother was the Widow Garnett, was it? your father married her, and had this one child."

"Yes, poor Raleigh, who then took my father's name and would have shared equally his fortune with me, but for his evil career."

"But, may I ask, sir, what you know of my past, and of my brother Raleigh?"

"I knew your brother well, in fact know him now, for he is not dead."

"Not dead?" gasped Gabrielle with a look of dread rather than pleasure at the news.

"No."

"You are sure of this?"

"I am certain."

"Where is he?"

"In hiding."

"Ah, yes, he is a fugitive from justice."

"So he is, and poor and wretched, a hunted man with no one to call him friend."

"How know you this, sir?"

"I have seen him but lately, and, as I said awhile since, I was going to the fort to see you."

"And why to see me, sir?"

"In behalf of your brother?"

"Has he sent you to me?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"He is ill, poor and suffering."

"That means that you come to me to aid him?"

"Exactly."

"My brother has never done aught to hold claim upon me."

"He is your own flesh and blood."

"True, and because he is I have helped him again and again."

"When I was a little girl I gave him my pin money, and as I grew into my teens he was wont to demand more and more from me until I had to let him have my jewelry and other things to get money for him."

"He sacrificed them all, and yet I aided him until at last I was compelled to protect myself and refuse."

"Now he sends you to me for aid?"

"Yes, and he is sadly in need."

"Under the circumstances then he shall not appeal in vain, for I will help him."

"That is noble of you, Miss Garland."

"Oh, no, it is only a duty I owe to myself."

"And you will share your fortune with your poor brother?"

"Share my fortune with him?" asked Gabrielle in utter amazement.

"Yes, as your brother he is entitled to half, and though your father disinherited him he should have his share."

"My dear sir, if my brother was the noble man I would have him, gladly would I divide my riches in two parts."

"But instead he has been the bane of my life, and he holds not the slightest claim upon my father's fortune, not being his own son, but my mother's, and she was not rich."

"Ah, no, I will not give him money to squander in gambling and dissipation, for rich as I am he would swamp my fortune in a very short while."

"What will you do for him then, Miss Garland?"

"Prove that you have the authority to act for him and I will pay over to you one thousand dollars for him."

"One thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is nothing to him."

"What, a thousand dollars is nothing to a man who is poor and suffering?"

"No, indeed."

"What does he want then?"

"Nothing less than a hundred thousand dollars will satisfy him."

"I am sorry, sir, your gray hairs have not taught you wisdom," was the cool response of Gabrielle Garland.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DEMAND.

"WHAT do you mean when you say that my gray hairs have not taught me wisdom?" asked the aged passenger somewhat rudely.

"Simply, that in demanding of me a fortune for a spendthrift, a fugitive from justice, one who has utterly taken himself out of my life, you show no wisdom whatever."

"Well, I mean what I say, that your brother Raleigh demands a liberal sum from you."

"He will not get it."

"You refuse to help him?"

"Oh no, I will help him as I said, nay, I will make it five thousand dollars if you will pledge for him that he never crosses my path again, or makes the slightest demand upon me for aid."

"And that is all?"

"All."

"You will not change your mind?"

"No."

"Under no consideration?"

"See here, sir, the sum I offer will be a start for him to make his fortune, and he can do so by work and honesty of purpose."

"When I know that he has done his best for several years, then am I willing to help him, and then only, and under no other consideration."

"You have my answer, sir."

"Pardon me if I touch upon another subject nearer to you, perhaps."

"Well, sir?"

"You had a lover once?"

"Sir?"

"I mean no offense, for let us understand each other, please."

"What would you know, sir?"

"Your lover was Prevost Preston, a cadet who disgraced himself, was it not?"

"The one I loved, sir, and still love, was Prevost Preston, a young man who left West Point in disgrace and became a wanderer, and at last meeting his death, it was said, in Mexico."

"But I can no more believe him dead than I believe him guilty of the charges against him."

"But they were proven against him."

"Circumstantial evidence is no proof, and that alone brought shame upon him."

"But he confessed his guilt."

"It is false."

"Ah! do not be too certain, for the books of the Academy will show his confession of guilt."

"I do not believe it, nor will I ever believe in his guilt until he tells me with his own lips that he was the thief they accused him of being."

"Well, he went from West Point a disgraced cadet, and the stigma is upon his life if he lives, and against his name if dead, for he lies in a dishonored grave."

"Never in my mind, sir."

"But enough of Prevost Preston and his misfortunes, so let us arrange this matter about your friend, my one-time brother, Raleigh Garnett."

"You consent only to give him five thousand?"

"Under no circumstances will I give him more."

"See, we are just facing another squad of soldiers, acting as patrol upon the trail to protect you upon your return to the fort."

"How know you this, sir?" asked Gabrielle, and she glanced out of the coach window and spoke pleasantly to the sergeant and his platoon, who saluted her as she went by.

"I know that the patrol was sent as a protection of you from Black Horse Bill, who robbed the clerk sent to you with a large sum of money."

"And killed him, which was worse; but I have seen that his poor mother is at least consoled with a sum sufficient to aid her, now that her support is taken from her."

"And you brought back with you the money to replace what you lost, I believe?"

"I do not understand your prying into my affairs, sir."

"You certainly presume upon your gray hairs," coldly said Gabrielle Garland, who was now anything but pleased with the old man.

"My dear young lady, my white hair shows wisdom; the wisdom of looking out for one's self."

"Now, I came on this trip only to see you, and I have enjoyed the talk I have had with you, and let me say that I have discovered just how you regard your unfortunate brother, and will only give him in his distress the pittance of five thousand dollars."

"Now, Miss Garland, let me tell you that I am authorized to collect from you for your brother every dollar which you have with you."

"I do not understand you or your demand."

"Let me explain."

"You had in the hands of the clerk who lost his life twenty-five thousand dollars in ready cash."

"You having lost this went to meet your attorney and get a like sum for investment in certain mining property."

"You also lost some jewels with your money, and offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for their return to you."

"You seem thoroughly well informed, sir."

"Oh, yes, I am, perfectly well informed."

"These jewels will be returned to you by the payment of ten thousand dollars to Captain DeLong, who gave his note for that sum for them, and has them in his possession for you, along with the miniature of Prevost Preston, which was what you offered the reward to get, more than for the jewelry."

"Now you have a large sum of money with you, all of twenty-five thousand dollars, perhaps more, and if this goes to your brother, along with the reward of ten thousand, and the sum taken from the attorney's clerk, then your brother will get sixty thousand, which will not, after all, be so bad, though he should have more."

"In heaven's name, sir, who are you?"

"Your brother, Gabrielle," was the cool reply of the supposed old man.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BROTHER'S DEMAND.

THE words fell with startling effect upon Gabrielle Garland when the pretended aged passenger told her that he was her brother, the wicked youth who had so sinned against her, her noble father who had done so much for him, and his loving mother, whose heart he had broken.

She at once changed her seat so she could face him and look squarely into his face.

She wished to be sure that he spoke the truth.

All along there had been something strangely familiar about the man, his tone of voice, his actions—a something she could not understand.

At last the secret came out, and now she saw that his hair was cut rather short, and that it was white, but whether prematurely from grief, sin or fright, she could not know.

A closer look also revealed to her penetrating eyes that his white beard must be bleached in some way, as here and there she saw dark streaks in it.

The blue glasses with their massive gold rims hid his eyes completely, and yet, as he now removed them and gazed at her with a wicked smile she saw that he had spoken the truth, that Raleigh Garnett must be before her.

It had been long years since last she saw him, and then he was a beardless boy, but still she could hardly be mistaken; it must be her half-brother, it could be no other.

The stoop of his shoulders with the rounding she felt sure must be assumed to carry out the idea of old age.

No, there could be no mistake, she was certain, and she said, in a low, earnest voice, full of deep regret, after having finished her close scrutiny of him:

"Yes, you are Raleigh Garnett, I now feel sure, come again to shadow my life just as I deemed the clouds were lifting."

"I am Raleigh, yes, my sister, but why I can cast a shadow upon the life of one who possesses a million and more of money, I cannot see."

"No; you judge everything from a pecuniary standpoint, you measure happiness alone by money."

"My pocketbook is my best friend."

"And my money seems to be my worst enemy, when it brings you again across my path, for were I poor, you would never have come near me again."

"You seem to have lost your love for your brother, Miss Garland."

"You have forfeited every atom of respect I ever had for you in my girlhood, and with me to lose respect is to lose love."

"How about Prevost Preston?"

"Not deeming him guilty, I have not lost respect for him."

"Nor love?"

"Nor love."

"You are a strange girl; but this conversation is useless."

"Then why continue it?"

"I wish to know what you intend to do for me."

"I have told you."

"Yes, not then knowing who I was."

"My decision is the same now."

"I demand money."

"Ah! like the road-agent, Black Horse Bill?"

"Yes."

"He robbed me of twenty-five thousand dollars—yes, of thirty-five thousand, for I have to pay ten more to get my jewels which he took."

"You have a large sum of money with you now?"

"I do not deny it."

"I want it."

"What claims have you to make this demand?"

"Just this: that you are very rich, I very poor, and I am determined to have my rights."

"You have no rights which I should respect, sir."

"This is idle talk."

"Do you, or do you not, intend to give me the money?"

"The five thousand, yes."

"No, every dollar that you have with you."

"I do not."

"Hold! we are nearing Mountain Spring, and you will doubtless find there Captain DeLong, or Dashing Charlie, for they have this whole trail patrolled against the outlaws."

"When we have passed them, then we will see what is to be done."

"Remember, betray me as your brother and I will drive my knife to your heart, if I hang the minute after I have done the deed."

In spite of her great nerve, Gabrielle shuddered at the threat.

But before she could reply the coach drew up at Mountain Spring, and Captain DeLong and Lieutenant Wainwright stepped forward to meet her, while behind them stood Dashing Charlie and a group of soldiers.

"Ah, Gabrielle, I am glad to see you back again, and you need have no fear this time of being robbed," said the captain, as he grasped her hand.

"You are all most kind to guard the trail as you have done."

"And you, Lieutenant Wainwright, I am glad to see you looking so much improved."

She shook hands with the young officer, and also spoke to Dashing Charlie and the soldiers.

The man by her side had dropped back into his corner and looked very feeble and tired.

Captain DeLong brought him a glass of water from the spring, which he took, thanking him in a low, weak voice.

After some further conversation the coach

rolled on once more, and when it had passed Outlaw Rocks, Raleigh Garnett arose from his reclining attitude and said sharply:

"Now, my sister, I have an offer to make you, and you can take your choice about accepting it or not."

CHAPTER XL.

GABRIELLE'S DECISION.

"STATE your offer, sir, and you shall quickly know whether I will accept it or not," said Gabrielle Garland in the coolest manner possible, and with not the faintest show of feeling toward one who stood in the relationship of a brother to her.

"Well, it is just this."

"Be explicit, please, for I shall soon change my seat to one upon the box, not liking the company I am in."

"Doubtless."

"I await, sir."

"Will you, upon my pledge never to cross your path again, never to make a demand upon you for money, give me the sum you now have with you?"

"I will not."

"Beware."

"You have heard my decision."

"Remember, I am to go my way at once and never see you again or make a demand upon you."

"What will you care for a pledge when you are again out of money?"

"I will keep my pledge this time."

"You have broken every pledge you ever made me."

"In your boyhood, Raleigh, life opened before you most promisingly."

"You were made my co-equal in my father's fortune, you were given all heart could wish, and gotten a cadetship at West Point which you did not care enough for to wish to remain there."

"Your nature was a bad one, your heart was evil, and you went from bad to worse, until now Heaven only knows what you are, as your demand upon me now is little better than the act of an outlaw."

"Have you finished your sermon?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you refuse my request?"

"I refuse your demand."

"Have you thought what I will do at the fort?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can make myself known as your brother."

"You will not do that."

"Oh, yes, I will."

"I would be spared that disgrace."

"Then pay me my money."

The maiden was in a quandary.

She did not wish her life wrecked by this man coming out and stating that he was her brother.

She did not recall the fact that he dared not do so, as he was then a fugitive from justice, and Captain DeLong would have promptly had him arrested, as he knew all the facts of his evil life.

But she had sought a refuge there in the fort from the world and from all who had known her except her devoted friend and kinswoman, Eloise DeLong.

Now it seemed as though the evil life of her brother must still dog her steps, bringing unhappiness.

"Have you decided?"

The man asked the question with the tone of one who had the advantage and knew it.

"I will not give you the money," she said, yet with less firmness than before.

"Then let me tell you a secret and see if you will face the dishonor of it."

"What dishonor?"

"That of being a sister of an outlaw."

"Yes, yes, you are an outlaw, Raleigh."

"I am more."

"What more can you be?"

"Shall I tell you who I am?"

"Alas, I know but too well."

"You do not."

"Your words have some strange meaning."

"Why, of course, they have, as you will see."

"Let me hear all."

"I am— Now don't faint, or cry out, or make a fool of yourself, sister mine."

"Do not call me by that sacred name, I beg of you."

"As for fainting, and making a fool of myself I am not that kind of a woman."

"You do not know what you will do until you hear what I have to say."

"I can hear nothing more than I know."

"Do you see this beard?"

"Yes."

"It is all whitened for the purpose representing age—see, a little rubbing will take off the gray hairs," and the man rubbed a part of his beard, and showed that it was a dark brown beneath the white.

"Now my hair is the same, and when I place this wig of long, brown, curling hair on, leave the white off of my beard and take these spectacles off of my eyes, you see before you—"

"The Mounted Tramp!" came in a hoarse voice from Gabrielle Garland, and she stared at

him with a look of intense horror, dread and disgust.

"Yes, I am the Mounted Tramp," he said with a sneer.

She still gazed at him with a look that he could not fathom.

"Put that wig on," she said sternly.

He obeyed.

"Now take off those spectacles!"

Again he obeyed.

"Place my dark brown vail over your beard—"

"!"

She arranged it so as to hide the whitened beard.

"Now look me straight in the face."

He did so, but his eyes, in spite of his strong, evil nature, fell under her searching gaze.

"Well, what does this mean?" he said harshly.

"It means that I wished to see you as I remembered the Mounted Tramp."

"Well?"

"I have done so, and—"

"And what?"

"You are Black Horse Bill, but not the Mounted Tramp," was the response of Gabrielle Garland, uttered with a look of scorn.

CHAPTER XLI.

UNCONVINCED.

THE response of the man to the charge of Gabrielle, that he might be Black Horse Bill, but was not the Mounted Tramp, was a mocking laugh.

"You will admit that you are Black Horse Bill, murderer and robber, I suppose?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, cut-throat and road-thief, in fact all that is bad."

"You seem proud of it?"

"Have I not reason, when I have defied the army for nearly two years and do about as I please along the trails?"

"Why, just see me now, riding in Racket Rube's stage-coach, when all along the trail there are soldiers guarding you from robbery."

"I tell you, sister mine, that I am proud of my clever deeds."

"I have often heard that a clever villain was a hero in his own eyes."

"Very true."

"And so you are Black Horse Bill?"

Gabrielle spoke in an absent-minded way.

"Yes, and the Mounted Tramp as well."

"You are not."

"But I am."

"I say no."

"Why, it was I who saved General Wesley and his party that night from the Indians."

"No."

"It was I who warned the fort of danger."

"No."

"It was I who led Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan to safety through the worst pass in the mountains."

"It was not."

"I also saved the settlement by warning them of the Indians' raid."

"No indeed, not you."

"I saved Captain DeLong's command in the mountains, when pursuing the Indians, and more, I went to the fort and enlisted as a soldier."

"Never!"

"I say yes, and then got a furlough and began my road-agent work again."

Gabrielle shook her head doubtfully.

"I killed your attorney's clerk and robbed him."

"That I believe of you, but no good act."

"I captured the scouts, but finding I was in a tight place pretended to have been captured by the Mounted Tramp, told my secret to him, and then to have been set free by him."

"I do not believe a word of this."

"But I have proof, and I tell you again that I am the Mounted Tramp."

"Show your proof."

"Why, as Black Horse Bill, I have now another band and they are in hiding very near where we now are, in spite of the soldiers watching for them."

"Just look at me, as I now am, and see what I can do."

"I have had too vivid a proof of what you can do, Black Horse Bill."

"Ah! that is right, call me by my name, Miss Garland."

"I wish your proof that you are the Mounted Tramp."

"Well, let me first say that I sold the jewels I took from that clerk to Captain DeLong on his note at thirty days, for the reward you offered, and which I saw posted up at the various places along the trail which I have marked with the graves of my victims."

"Oh, man! are you lost utterly to every sense of conscience?"

"I believe I am."

"It is better to be callous, for then I do not feel, do not dread the night when the ghosts of those I have slain walk about."

"No, I have buried in oblivion every particle of conscience I ever possessed, so now am capable of doing any deed without remorse, and therefore I warn you that you have to deal

with a man as merciless as a tigress protecting her young."

"I can now believe anything of you."

"Thanks!"

"I see that you begin to appreciate me, sister mine."

"Well, sir, what is your will, for I wish to sever the contamination of your presence."

"First, to prove that I am the Mounted Tramp."

"You can never prove that to me."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because he performed acts of mercy, saved life, and rendered noble service."

"You think that I cannot do that?"

"I know that it is not in you to be guilty of one good act."

"How well you understand me."

"But you know that I went to the fort and enlisted as a private in the troop of Captain DeLong?"

"Well?"

"I asked for a furlough of one month, and received it."

"The Mounted Tramp did."

"Well, here is the furlough, and if I am not the Mounted Tramp, how then did I come in possession of this valuable paper?"

He held out the paper as he spoke, and Gabrielle glanced over it carefully, as though she expected to find it a forgery.

Then she handed it back without a word, and once more searched his face in a way that made him drop his eyes and move in a nervous way.

"You are convinced now, I suppose, though really I do not care whether you know me as the Mounted Tramp or the Chief of the Black Horse Braves."

"You have heard the old couplet:

"A woman convinced against her will
Is of the same opinion still!"

"That means that you do not believe me?"

"I do not know what to believe, and I care only in that when I looked upon the face of the Mounted Tramp I regarded him as a noble, good man, and I dislike to feel that I made so great a mistake in reading human nature."

"Do you understand?"

"I do; and now, having settled that point, I will turn to the more important one of securing my demand upon you."

CHAPTER XLII.

A COMPROMISE.

"WHAT you have to state, do so quickly," and it was evident that Gabrielle was beginning to lose her patience.

"I will not detain you long, and then I will leave you."

"Leave me?"

"Oh yes, for I have no idea of going on to the fort."

"How can you avoid it now?"

"Very easily."

"I do not see how, for if you attempt to leave the coach, Racket Rube, believing you to be an old man, and thinking you have gone mad, will forcibly detain you."

"The thing is possible for me to do, as you shall see."

"Be quick, then."

"You see we are approaching a very dangerous part of the trail, down a steep hill which will require all of the attention and strength of the driver."

"Now, when we come to turn, you can call to the driver that you wish to ride with him on the box again."

"He will halt, you will mount the box, and leave me in the coach."

"With my knife I will cut the rear curtain, slip into the boot, and spring behind a rock or bush, and the coach will pass on."

"You can say you left your valuables in the coach, little dreaming the dear old man, and I will leave a note pinned to your sashel that I have robbed you, and that I am Black Horse Bill."

"See?"

"I do see that you are the cleverest scamp I ever heard of, if you have my blood in your veins."

"Thanks, sister mine."

"Now hand me over your money."

"I will hand you the five thousand dollars."

"Every dollar you have, or I shall lean out of this coach window, shoot Racket Rube through the back of the head, and then, taking your money by force, I will mount one of the coach-horses and make my escape, and then send in word to the fort that I am your brother, Black Horse Bill."

Gabrielle did not utter a word, for she was almost overwhelmed.

The outlaw saw that he was gaining ground, so continued:

"You give me that money, and you have my pledge never to cross your life again, or to demand a dollar from you."

"I will keep the secret as to who I am, Racket Rube will not have to die, and I will give up my lawless life as a road-agent, and with the money I have, go far from here and live like a gentle man."

"You have my proposition, so accept or de-

cline at your pleasure, only be quick about it, for I am anxious to leave the coach at the spot I spoke of and it is only a mile away from here."

Poor Gabrielle bowed her head in her hands in grief and shame.

She had gotten from the attorney the amount of money she had desired for investment, and considerable more for her own uses.

She had told him to pay the mother of the young man who was slain, the sum of five thousand dollars, and what he had been robbed of, a like sum which she would have to give up if not more, the money for the mother of the slain clerk, and ten thousand dollars for her jewels would run the amount up to sixty-five thousand, if not more, should she yield up all she had with her.

It was true, if she had had to divide her fortune with her evil brother, he would have gotten ten times that sum, and yet she would not have cared for this, if only he had been worthy of it.

Nor was it the loss of the money now that she grieved over.

She would gladly have given double the sum could she have been certain that she would be forever free from such a vampire.

But what she felt most keenly was that she would be forced to yield, to allow him to rob her, and she be a party to it, having to hide the real truth from all eyes, except from her more than brother, Captain DeLong and his devoted wife Eloise, her as equally devoted friend.

For a few minutes these thoughts flashed through her mind.

She felt the coach rocking badly, and knew that they were approaching the worst part of the trail, the very spot where the man would be best able to make his escape, if at all.

Beyond, a mile, was Rock Creek Ford, and there she knew were soldiers.

So, having decided, she opened the little sachel she carried while the outlaw said:

"You are wise."

"I am a fool to yield, for did I do my duty I would refuse and you would go to the gallows."

"Don't talk of such a horrid fate for your loving brother, Gabrielle."

"Come, how much have you in that package?"

"The same amount you robbed the clerk of."

"Twenty-five thousand?"

"Yes."

"You have more."

She hesitated.

"You have more money with you, I know."

"Yes, some more."

"How much?"

"Will not this do you?"

"No."

"I will need some money at the fort."

"Your check is good, as I know."

"Yes, having been the forger, I now know, who got several thousands by signing my name."

"Granted, but that revenue did not last long."

"Now how much more have you?"

"Here is every dollar," and she placed another package beside the other.

"Five thousand, I see."

"That will do me, and now you can ride on the box while I take my leave," and the man laughed in triumph.

CHAPTER XLIII.

IN SUSPENSE.

HAVING taken the money from her sachel, Gabrielle was lost in silent thought for a minute and then said:

"See here, these papers are worthless to you, as a glance will show you, and there are a few other things in the sachel which you can leave there."

"I shall put the money back again, lock it, and you can cut it open with your knife and get the money."

"You have a purse with you?"

"Yes, with a couple of hundred dollars in it."

"Take it."

"Thanks, I will, and your jewelry too."

"If you do, then it will be known that you robbed me before I left the coach."

"True, I did not think of that."

"Yes, keep your purse, only give me the money; there—you can have this change and several five dollar bills for pin-money."

"I won't be mean, sister."

"So I see."

"Now, let me leave this coach."

"Certainly, and let me bid you a last, a long farewell."

He held out his hand but she did not notice it, and calling out of the window said:

"Racket Rube, may I ride up with you again?"

"You bet you may, miss."

"I'll pull up soon as we get to a level."

A moment after the halt was made and before the driver could descend from the box as was his polite intention, Gabrielle had opened the stage-door and swung herself around upon the step over the fore-wheel.

"You are as active as a cat, miss; but give me your hand," and with this doubtful compli-

ment, Racket Rube drew Gabrielle up to a seat by his side.

"How is the old gent?" he asked after they had started.

"He is much better I feel sure," was the dry response and it was full of a significance which Racket Rube did not see.

"I hope we won't jolt the life out of him, miss, when we come to the Devil's Ladder, just ahead, for it is the worst bit of road on the whole trail," the driver said.

It was almost in the heart of Gabrielle to say she would not care if they did "jolt the life out of the old gent," but she simply said nothing more than:

"Oh, I don't think it will harm him."

The Devil's Ladder was soon reached, and gathering his reins well in hand, and with foot on the brake Racket Rube began the rough and perilous descent of the very properly named hill.

Gabrielle braced herself upon the foot-rest, and though pretending to watch the skillful driver, her ears and eyes were on the alert for the wicked brother who she knew was then plotting his escape.

It required the greatest nerve on her part to stand the strain thus put upon her.

But she bore up splendidly, and heedless of the dangers of the Devil's Ladder kept glancing backward, hoping to see the outlaw glide away to one side of the road.

She tried to discover some vibration of the coach different from that which the condition of the rough descent caused, yet could not do so.

She listened attentively for the sound of tearing leather, yet heard nothing but the crunching of the wheels upon the rocks, the hoof-falls, and the voice of the driver talking to his horses.

At last the bottom of the hill was reached, and the team was sent along at a good pace, but Gabrielle had not seen the form of the outlaw glide away nor had she heard a sound to indicate his going.

The Rock Creek Ford was near at hand now, the valley level and good traveling, and the team went briskly along, as though confident of a refreshing drink of water and a short rest at the ford.

Soon the bowlders about the ford came into view, and as the coach rolled into the shallow stream of clearest water swiftly flowing along, the horses ducked their noses deep into the crystal flood and were happy.

Beyond there appeared now a sergeant, and coming out from among the rocks were his soldiers who had been in hiding there.

As there was no further use of hiding now, the soldiers appeared, disappointed that the outlaws had not sought that spot to hold up the coach.

"How are you, Sergeant Pepper?" called out Racket Rube.

"All well, sir."

And, with a military salute to Gabrielle, the sergeant continued:

"I hope, miss, you are feeling well, and have not had any fright on the way."

"I am feeling quite well, thank you, Sergeant Pepper."

And Gabrielle's face did not belie the following words:

"But I am tired, and anxious to get to the fort to rest."

Had her outlaw brother yet made his escape? If not, would it be possible for him to do so along the road they then had to follow? for well she knew how lynx-eyed was Racket Rube.

Then, with a wave of his hand, Racket Rube drove on once more, and Gabrielle waited to hear if the soldiers discovered anything wrong about the coach.

But nothing was said to indicate it, and Gabrielle was still compelled to be in suspense as to what the outlaw had done.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A SURPRISE.

THE reader can well imagine the suspense of Gabrielle Garland, at her ignorance of what the outlaw chief had done, as she drove on toward the fort with Racket Rube.

Had Black Horse Bill cut his way out as he had intimated to her that he could?

Was he still in the coach?

If so, why?

Did he trust that she would not betray him, and had determined to go on to the fort for some reason of his own?

If so, what would be the outcome of it all?

Such were the questions which worried the poor girl terribly.

And yet she would not, if Black Horse Bill was still in the coach, let him see that she cared enough to halt and find out.

If he had escaped then he had done so in a way too clever for her to discover, though she was cognizant of the fact of his going.

How he had done this she could not discover, for she had been afraid that Racket Rube might see him.

She wanted him gone, well out of the way, in spite of the pecuniary loss it would be to her.

And she prayed earnestly that he was gone.

At last as the coach rolled over a hill-top the look-out tower came into view, and the flag floated boldly out against the dark background of the mountains beyond.

There was the fort and Gabrielle knew that the sentinel had already reported the coming of the coach, and that her suspense must soon end.

Placing his hand to his lips Racket Rube sent silvery notes ringing across space until they reached the ears of those in the fort, the sentinel upon the tower having already reported the stage-coach in sight.

Then from all sides began to gather the crowds, of officers and their families, and soldiers off duty, to see the coach come in.

They knew that the trooper Captain DeLong, and Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men were along the trail to protect the coach.

But had it passed through the danger line this time without being held up?

Upon the box with Racket Rube Gabrielle Garland was seen and recognized, and the arrival of the coach was greeted with a cheer.

Rube always made it a rule to come into the fort in grand style, his horses on a run.

He switched through the stockade gate, whirled around the circle, and dashed up to the house of Captain DeLong, where he was to leave Gabrielle, in fine style.

"Hold hard, miss!"

This he said just before halting, and Gabrielle did hold hard.

It was well for her that she did, or she would have plunged down on the backs of the wheelers with the sudden halt.

General Wesley was at Captain DeLong's, waiting to welcome Gabrielle, and he aided her from the box, when Eloise DeLong sprang forward and greeted her with the warmest affection.

"Ho Racket Rube; what is the matter behind here?" called out Surgeon Hallowell who was also there, just as Gabrielle had cast an eye toward the rear of the coach to see if the outlaw had cut his way out.

A soldier was at the boot to take out Gabrielle's small trunk, and now all eyes were upon a rent in the leather, three feet in length.

Then, too, in the rear of the coach, near the seat, was another cut in the leather curtain as long as the one on the outside.

Racket Rube had leaped to the ground, glanced at the split boot, then throwing open the coach-door cried, excitedly:

"Great God, folks! What is ther old gent?"

"What old gentleman, driver?" asked the general.

"One as come through with me, sir, and was coming to the fort to see his soldier son?"

"When did you see him last?"

"After descending ther Devil's Ladder, sir."

"Quick! hand me my sachel, please," cried Gabrielle.

Rube took it from the seat and handed it to her.

Tied to the handle by a string was a card upon which was written in a bold hand, evidently shaken by the moving vehicle:

"You are rich, Miss Garland, and I am only a poor outlaw."

"Hence I take your money which you so carelessly left in your sachel."

"Thanking you, I remain"

"Yours."

"BLACK HORSE BILL."

"Alias THE OLD GENTLEMAN."

"Alias THE MOUNTED CRAMP."

"Alias HORNER ROCKEWE."

"De enter."

A groan went up from all who heard General Wesley read this card.

Then all eyes turned upon Gabrielle, and then upon the sachel, across which was a knife-cut through which the contents had been stolen.

"Did you have much money with you, Miss Gabrielle?" asked the general.

"Yes, sir; over thirty thousand dollars, and he has taken it all."

"When did you know this man was in your coach last, driver?" roared the general, now greatly excited.

"At Devil's Ladder, sir, Miss Garland got on ther box with me."

"Then he escaped there and is on foot, so must be taken."

"I will dispatch a courier to Captain DeLong at once and send three troops immediately to the scene with every scout at the fort."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MAN-HUNT.

NEVER before had any one at the fort seen General Wesley so deeply in earnest as he was upon discovering the loss which Gabrielle Garland had met with.

"You have lost a fortune through this man, Miss Gabrielle, and he must be taken," he said, hoarsely.

Then he questioned Gabrielle about the old man, as he was supposed to have been.

He had joined Bobby Moore's coach at the station below where Racket Rube took the reins,

and she had become interested in him, she frankly admitted, believing him to be an old man.

He had asked her to ride in the coach with him for company, and the two had had much conversation together.

Then she had gotten again upon the box with Racket Rube, just before reaching Devil's Ladder Hill.

This was all that Gabrielle made known to the general.

As for Racket Rube he was dumfounded.

He could hardly speak for awhile, but at last said that the man had cut his way out of the coach at Devil's Ladder, when all his attention was upon his team and vehicle, for nowhere else could he have escaped without being seen.

Gabrielle's trunk was in the rear boot, but undisturbed, and there were a few other things there for different ones in the fort and these had not been molested.

"I thought, when I helped the old man in and out of the hearse, general, that he had the largest and hardest arm for a man of his years I had ever known."

"Oh, Lordy! it was Black Horse Bill in disguise, and I feels like giving up driving the Overland and taking to scouting."

"If he is not taken soon, Rube, he never will be, with the money he has gotten."

"He will quickly get out of this country, though it is a pity that Miss Gabrielle has to stand the weight of his going."

"I shall consider the money well invested. General Wesley, if it rids the country of Black Horse Bill and his gang," said Gabrielle most cheerfully.

"You are a plucky little woman indeed; but here is my courier," and turning to the man who just dashed up on horseback and saluted, General Wesley continued:

"Go at once to Crows' Roost Range and report to Captain DeLong the robbery which has taken place."

"Tell him the robber, Black Horse Bill, cut his way out of the coach at the hill known as Devil's Ladder, and to at once throw his force about there."

"Also say that I shall have three troops of cavalry to follow you as quickly as they can reach the scene, and to have Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men every one take the trail of this daring robber the moment that it is light enough for them to see."

The courier saluted and was off like an arrow from a bow, just as the sun went down behind the horizon of mountains miles away.

Telling Gabrielle that he would call later in the evening General Wesley then sought his quarters to meet the officers of the different troops he had ordered to the field and to give them their instructions.

They were already awaiting him there, and being junior in rank to Captain DeLong, the general said:

"You are to report to Captain DeLong, gentlemen, and I will dispatch provisions after you to-night, and for a stay of ten days, for if we do not capture this outlaw we will be a butt for the ridicule of the country after this most clever and daring robbery of his just accomplished."

"Explain the whole situation to Captain DeLong, and tell him if he needs more men send for them and I will mount several companies of infantry and dispatch to him so that we can beat the whole country, for those wolves of the trails—well, Racket Rube, what is it?"

"As I don't return, sir, on my run for two days, I want a permit to go along with the soldiers."

"Go ahead, for you can be of a great deal of service to them I well know."

"I kin if we catches Black Horse Bill, general, for I has the rope the Vigilantes give me a year ago, and it have dangled a dozen gents at the end of it."

Five minutes after the three troops of cavalry rode out of the fort, and along with them went Racket Rube and half a dozen scouts.

In the mountains the courier had been riding like the wind and when darkness came on it found him half a dozen miles from the fort.

The moon rose before he reached Rock Creek Ford and there he halted an instant to get a fresh horse and report what had occurred to the soldiers encamped at that point.

At the Valley Camp he got another horse and again at the foot of the mountain, and so continued at the same breakneck speed up to Crows' Roost, where he dashed into Captain DeLong's camp.

All were startled at his coming, but far more so when they heard what he had to report, and at once the soldiers were ordered in their saddles, while a courier was dispatched along the trail to notify each camp of what had happened and to have them upon their guard, while from each party more or less men were ordered to return and join their captain.

Having given these orders, Captain DeLong, with Dashing Charlie and all of his force but a couple of soldiers, rode at once to Devil's Ladder to be on the scene for work at daybreak.

They had just arrived there when up rode the three troops from the fort, and all felt that at last the doom of Black Horse Bill was sealed.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE OUTLAW'S ESCAPE.

WHEN Gabrielle Garland got upon the box with Racket Rube, just before reaching the dangerous hill known as Devil's Ladder, Black Horse Bill at once aroused to action the moment she had left the coach.

He took from an inner pocket a knife as sharp as a razor and slit open the satchel.

From it he took the money, glanced quickly at the papers and other things it contained, and tossed them to one side as though of no use to him.

Next he turned to the back of the coach, where high up was the thick leather dividing it from the baggage-rack.

This was slit for the length of three feet, and through it the outlaw easily crawled.

His knife again came into requisition there, and the outer leather was split down to the rack.

Through this opening the outlaw peered.

The coach was rolling and pitching in the rough descent like a ship in a wild sea, and had he been the old man he appeared to be, he could never have gotten out in safety.

But get out he did, and with apparent ease, trotting along behind the coach until he came to where he saw a chance to suddenly dart behind a rock.

This he did.

Until the coach was a good distance off, he remained where he had halted, and then rising he returned on up the hill.

After a walk of an eighth of a mile he turned off to the right, following a rocky deer trail around the mountain-side.

This he held to for some distance, when coming to a cliff he began to climb up the rugged sides, which he did with comparative ease.

Here and there were projections of rock, upon steep, almost precipitous sides, and upon these, clumps of trees had found a resting place and rooted there.

To one of such spots he went, when, parting the foliage he found himself upon a rocky shelf, behind which was the entrance to a cave.

That the outlaw knew the spot well, was shown by the manner in which he had gone there, and that it was a retreat was proven by the fact that in the entrance to the cave was a lantern, a bundle of candles tied together, a coffepot, frying-pan, tin cup, plate, a haversack of provisions, roll of blankets, and the remains of a fire, with wood piled near and matches at hand.

"Home again, and richer by many thousands than I was three days ago when I rode to the station to take the coach back again."

"I will have to foot it over to the Divide, as I left my horse back at the station, but I will not mind that, and just as soon as night comes I will start, for when Racket Rube reports the robbery there will be a hundred men sent to Devil's Ladder to be put upon my track with the coming of dawn."

"Now to content myself in patience until I can cook my supper to-night, and then strike out for the Divide, where I will be wholly safe."

He spread the blankets out upon the floor of the cave, and then looked over his packages of money.

He took from his pocket the amount which he had taken from the young clerk, and carefully counted over the whole sum.

Then he placed the bills away in his clothing, tying them in securely, and throwing himself upon the blankets went to sleep as soundly as though he had not a sin upon his conscience.

The hours passed, and at last the sun went down.

He awoke while it was upon the horizon and began arrangements for cooking his supper.

At last he said:

"It is too dark now for them to see the smoke, so I will light my fire."

This he did, and, going down the steep hill-side to a rock, he got a canteen of water, made some coffee, fried some bacon, and ate a very hearty meal.

Then he took up the grip-sack he had brought with him from the coach as baggage, and which contained his revolvers.

Buckling them about him, he put out the fire and started down the hill to the valley.

He seemed to know the way well, and soon struck a trail leading to the southward toward the Divide.

"If even Dashing Charlie can follow the trail I leave, he is welcome to catch me," he muttered as he strode along.

"What a fury the scouts and soldiers will be in when they find that Black Horse Bill has been the nice old gentleman who was going to the fort to see his soldier boy."

"Hal hal hal but I would give a hundred dollars to see the face of Racket Rube when he discovers me gone from his coach and the hole I went through."

"It will break his heart, I am sure."

"And dear Gabrielle, how well she will play her part."

"Why, she will look as innocent as a child, and pocket her loss without a word of regret."

"Well, if I was disinterested, I managed to get a good-sized lump of the inheritance, and I

will get that ten thousand more, too, for which I hold Captain DeLong's note."

"Yes, and I have those notes of the settlers to collect, too, and these with what my treasure will bring will make me a rich man, and I can afford to give up this lawless life, or I may yet end on the gallows."

CHAPTER XLVII.

BLACK HORSE BILL AT HOME.

THE trail which Black Horse Bill was following was a long one.

It led him through valleys and over hills until at last the plain was reached, beyond which was the Divide.

The settlements lay many miles away to the eastward, the fort beyond the Divide far to the westward, and all near the range was wild and unbroken country.

Black Horse Bill pressed rapidly on.

He walked well, making even four miles an hour, and after midnight, having been some six hours on a steady tramp, he reached the Divide.

Following along the trail for a mile he was about to ascend by way of a well-worn deer-trail, when suddenly he heard the neighing of a horse.

He stopped instantly after bounding into the nearest cover.

What did that mean?

Who was lurking there in the Divide?

Were they Indians, settlers or soldiers?

These questions he asked himself, and as though to aid him in finding out, the neigh was heard again.

He noted the distance and the direction.

Slowly he went in the direction of the sound.

He pressed on slowly and soon came upon a corral of horses.

"Ah! what does this mean?" he muttered.

Just then a voice called out:

"It's my horse, Kit, as I said it was, and he's thrown himself with the rope and neighed to let me know about it."

"Oh, that horse has man-sense he has."

"All right, help him up and fix him so he can't throw himself again, for we don't wish any neighing horses around, you know," said another voice.

"You bet we don't, Kit Kirby, and I'll fix him all right."

With this silence followed for awhile and then two forms passed near where the outlaw was crouching in the bushes.

They passed on and he followed slowly.

Up a canyon they went, and there among the rocks, around a spring there was a camp.

A fire was burning low and yet its flickering rays revealed the forms of men lying about wrapped in their blankets.

"They are Dashing Charlie's scouts," muttered the outlaw.

"Well, he had a level head to place them here, for this is just the place to look for me."

"I see how it is now."

"The chief of scouts and several of his men were over in Crows' Roost, while the balance were stationed here."

"Had I come here by daylight they would have seen me crossing the plain and I would have walked right into their trap."

"It was lucky for me I did not start as soon as I escaped from the coach."

"Well, now I know that their headquarters camp is here, and they have scouts out about the Divide I am sure, so I must be on the alert and make no mistake."

"The sooner I get to my retreat the better, and I can afford to wait there as long as they care to camp here."

"When they are gone I have business to perform, but I must go slow, for it would not do for me to be found away from my retreat."

"Once I reach there, Dashing Charlie and all his scouts could never find me."

So musing the outlaw passed on up the mountain-side.

He had reached half-way up to the summit when he came to a stream gliding through precipitous banks down the hills and winding in many a zigzag course about among the rocks.

The trail he followed was a well-worn one, which deer, wolves and other animals followed to get to the stream or seek a covert in the wooded hills.

The soil was rocky and an iron shod horse would hardly have left a track there.

Reaching the stream he turned his steps against the current.

It was knee-deep, and flowed swiftly, but he pushed on slowly and made no halt until he had gone all of half a mile.

The banks of the stream had narrowed and become wild and rugged to a wonderful degree.

In places the stream deepened, but though at times the waters reached to his waist, the outlaw did not hesitate, but kept steadily on.

The rocky banks of the brook were now overhung with dwarf trees upon which vines had twined and intertwined until in places they formed an archway of foliage beneath which he passed.

The moon shone brightly, but he did not appear to need its light to lead him on his way,

for he knew the trail well, even though it was a watery one he followed.

The stream at length ended in a cataract, which tumbled over a rock twenty feet above.

But upon the side of this fall was a dark, cavernous opening, and into this the outlaw penetrated.

All was darkness then where he had gone.

But only for a moment, for there came the flash of a match, a lantern was lighted, that was taken from a rocky shelf near, and the outlaw was in a cave running far back under the mountain.

Lighted by the lantern, he went on until at last he came into an open space in the very midst of a mass of rocks, and against a cliff there stood a small log cabin.

"Home again."

"There's no place like it, either, when one is a hunted man," he said, grimly, as he threw open the cabin door and entered.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

COLLECTING A NOTE.

THE settlements had become quieted down, after their narrow escape from death and destruction at the hands of the red-skins, through their having been warned of their danger by the Mounted Tramp.

The settlers killed in the fight with the Indians had been eulogized in the churches scattered about among the three settlements, and their families had been given friendly aid by the others.

The situation of the settlement necessitated its mail going and coming through Fort Advance, and once each week there was a mail-rider who carried the leather bags to and fro, and turned them over to Racket Rube, or received them from him, as the case might be.

There was, however, not such a very extensive mail going into the Three Settlements, for the settlers spent more time in work than in letter-writing.

But through the mail-rider's visit each week to the fort all the current gossip was picked up, and papers read by the officers were frequently sent to the settlers for their perusal.

Through the mail-rider, and the visit now and then of a settler to the fort, the story had become known of how the Mounted Tramp had enlisted in Captain DeLong's troop, and then had gone upon a furlough.

It was also known that he had not returned to the fort, and more, it was reported as well that the Mounted Tramp had been discovered to be none other than Black Horse Bill, and that he was again at his evil deeds on the Overland Trails.

The fact that he had been recognized by several of the settlers caused many to regret that he had not been strung up when they had him in their power, in spite of his having come there to warn the settlement of the Indian raid against it.

Then settler Rand came back after a visit Eastward, and reported having been robbed by Black Horse Bill and his gang.

The fact that the band had been wiped out, all except their chief, had given the settlers the hope that there would be no more lawlessness upon the border.

But vain the hope, as they soon discovered when the robbery of the coach was reported, with the killing of the young clerk and the taking from the settler who was a passenger his pocketbook and two notes of considerable value.

The settler holding the two notes had had no difficulty in getting two others in their place, and neither of those who had given them ever expected that the outlaw would make use of the little slips of paper bearing their autographs.

The notes did not come due upon the same day, and as the time specified in the other one given to replace the stolen note, was not the same, Dick Darcy did not give a thought to the one which was held by the outlaw.

Dick Darcy was a well-to-do man and had a pleasant home in the outskirts of the settlement.

He had a wife and several children, and was retelling the news which the mail-rider to the fort had told him that afternoon of the last bold act of the outlaw chief in robbing Gabrielle Garland a second time, and his family were most deeply interested in the story, when there came a hail outside.

Always hospitable to every traveler who came his way, Dick Darcy at once went out to invite the one in to remain all night.

"Is this the home of Richard Darcy?" asked a horseman who was near the piazza.

"It is Dick Darcy's home, for I don't claim the name of Richard."

"Who are you, friend, and what can I do for you?"

"I am a traveler, sir, and came by this way to see you on a matter of business."

"Well, come right in and we'll talk over matters."

"Tie your horse there and my man will put him up, and you are in time for a good supper, and Bettie will give you as nice a bed as you ever slept in."

"I do not doubt that, sir, and I thank you for your kindness; but I come on a business that is not exactly pleasant for you perhaps."

"Out with it then, for I am a man who faces what is to come always."

"What is it, my friend, if you will not dismount?"

"Well, sir, I have here a note of yours, payable to Racket Rube for value received and amounting to three hundred dollars."

"It is due to-day, Mr. Darcy."

"Now tell me where you got that note?"

"I live over in the mining country, and knowing that you were good for the note, I took it in trade."

"Well, sir, who gave it to you?"

"A miner."

"Then let me tell you, sir, that the note you hold is worthless, for the man I gave it to was robbed of it, along with his money, by the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill."

"Do you mean it?" and the stranger rode up close to the piazza.

"I do, sir, and in place of the note thus stolen I gave another to Robert Rand, and the one you hold is of no account whatever."

"Then you refuse to pay it, Mr. Darcy?"

"I certainly do refuse."

"I have been told that you keep plenty of ready money about you, and as I hold the note it must be paid," said the horseman.

"No, sir, I will never pay a dollar of it."

"I will die first."

"Then die," and with the words there was a flash and report, and Richard Darcy dropped dead upon the threshold of his home.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SECOND VISIT.

THE moment that the horseman saw Richard Darcy fall he leaped from his saddle, rushed into the room where sat the slain man's wife and children, and laid the note upon the table, while he cried:

"I hold this note of your husband, due to-day."

"Pay it to me, or I will kill you."

The startled woman tried to speak, but the threat was repeated, and in terror she ran to a secret caddy in the wall and took out a bag of gold.

Quickly she placed it upon the table and began to count out the amount of the note, while she cried:

"Oh, sir, here it is."

"You will spare my husband now, will you not?"

The man pocketed the money and replied:

"No, I spare no one."

"I am Black Horse Bill."

"Good-night."

Wheeling suddenly he strode from the room, stepped over the body of his victim, threw himself into his saddle and was away in the darkness before the terrified wife and children could collect their senses, or know what to do.

Thus precious time was lost, and when at last a pursuit was started, the outlaw had gained over half an hour's start, and which way he had gone in the darkness no one could tell.

So they had to await the coming of dawn to start upon the trail.

But with so many horsemen riding about, the right trail was not known from the wrong one, and not one could tell which way to go to capture the cruel outlaw.

The excitement in the settlement was intense, men stopped their work and groups of horsemen roamed about hoping to stumble upon the outlaw murderer.

Word was sent over to the fort, and General Wesley was asked to allow Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men to come to the settlements and see if they could do anything in trailing the outlaw.

As not a sign of the Bravos had been seen since the robbing of Gabrielle Garland, and the coach passed in safety over the trail, Captain DeLong was ordered in with his command and his Minute Men were dispatched to the scene of the murder to try and solve the riddle of where the daring desperado chief could be found.

So the scouts went to the settlement while Captain DeLong and his command returned to the fort, all deeply chagrined that they could find no clue to the Bravos leader, who had so cleverly gone to the settlement to get the money on a note which was due.

Dashing Charlie on his way over stopped at the range for the heavier force of his men, and once they put in an appearance at the settlement the settlers felt relieved.

They heard the story of the murder, as told by Mrs. Darcy, had her describe the man, and then started off to discover which way he had gone after riding away from the house.

He was mounted upon a splendid black horse, which cleared the fence with ease, when he started off, and why he had not taken all the gold in the bag no one could understand.

But days passed and Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men were forced to give up the trail and consider themselves beaten.

They set off upon their return to the fort in the afternoon, and that night a settler sat in his house reading, when he was called out by one of his men who said a scout had arrived who wanted to see him in a great hurry.

He was met at the door by a tall, bearded

man, who placed a revolver muzzle hard against his side while he said:

"Rupert Smythe, I hold your note, due to-day, for four hundred dollars, given to Robert Rand."

"Come, no nonsense, but walk right into your room there, get out your money-bag and pay it, or share the same fate that Richard Darcy did."

"Quick, take your choice, and if you call for help, that moment you are a dead man!"

"I—I—have no money, sir, except some I hold in keeping for others—"

"That is good enough for me."

"Quick! get your money and pay me, or take the consequences."

There was no mistaking the man before him. It was Black Horse Bill, and Rupert Smythe knew it at a glance.

The fate of Richard Darcy arose before him, and, though there were others within call, he had to obey the command given him.

He turned with a sigh and walked slowly into the room, the outlaw by his side and pressing the revolver hard against him, while his finger was upon the trigger.

The frightened, trembling man took from his desk a roll of bills and counted out the money.

"I have but five hundred dollars, as you see, and it is not mine, but belongs to others."

"It belongs to me now, and I shall take the extra hundred for interest on your note and Richard Darcy's, for I said nothing about the interest."

"This will just fill the bill, this extra hundred."

"Now sit there, sir, with your back to the door."

"There! now hold out your hands, and keep these as a souvenir of a visit from Black Horse Bill."

With this he clasped irons upon his wrists and then placed a gag in his mouth, after which he left the room with a cheery:

"Good-night, Smythe, and tell the neighbors they will hear more of Black Horse Bill."

CHAPTER L.

IN VAIN.

NOT until he heard the clatter of hoofs going rapidly away from his home did Rupert Smythe dare rise from the chair where the outlaw chief had placed him.

Then he ran out of the room into the kitchen, where his wife and a couple of farm-hands were, and startled them at beholding him gagged and in irons.

He was quickly relieved of his gag, but to get the irons off was a different matter, as the outlaw had taken the key.

But once his mouth was freed of the gag he shouted out:

"Quick! raise an alarm!"

"Black Horse Bill has been here to collect that note he stole from Robert Rand."

"Go, men, and alarm the settlers far and wide, for he robbed me of five hundred dollars."

This appeal sent the men running to the stables for horses, and an hour later a score of men had assembled at the home of Rupert Smythe and were listening to his story, while a blacksmith was filing the irons off his hands.

This second visit of Black Horse Bill startled the settlement terribly, and at once a courier was dispatched to the fort with the news, and assistance was asked for to help hunt the desperado down.

The wildest stories were afloat, of how Black Horse Bill had his retreat near the settlement and had come with a large number of followers, all mounted upon jet-black horses and armed to the teeth.

Settlers hardly dared leave their homes alone, and a Vigilante band was organized to hunt down the Black Horse Bravos.

General Wesley promptly sent Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men to again see what could be done to find the trail.

But in vain their search, and after days thrown away the scouts returned to the fort almost disheartened.

"The only way to hunt down Black Horse Bill, is to throw out a heavy line over the Divide and march from one end of it to the other, and then we can drive the outlaws out of their lair," said Dashing Charlie.

"I will follow your plan, Dashing Charlie, not only with the Divide, but with the Crows' Roost Range and all the surrounding country."

"How many men do you think I will need?" asked the general.

"The more the safest plan, sir, and best chance."

"All right; I will put both cavalry and infantry upon the work, and you must take every scout you have in the fort to go with the soldiers, while the settlers shall be invited to go along also."

"Under such circumstances, sir, there should be no escape for the outlaws," Captain DeLong remarked.

"I intend there shall be none," was the determined response of General Wesley.

The scouts were at once called together, the settlers notified, and four companies of infantry and three troops of cavalry ordered out on the march.

They all moved at night, and were to secretly rendezvous at a point where the Divide began.

Soon after midnight all had arrived, the soldiers, troops and scouts, and, going into camp, they rested until dawn, when they moved up over the Divide with a line a mile in length.

It extended to the plain on either side and was stretched out over the hills so that not even a wolf could have broken through the line.

At the other end of the Divide were stationed troops to head off the escaping outlaws when driven ahead of the advancing force.

The scouts led the way, and just as light came the march was begun.

The nature of the ground in places was very rough, and here and there the men had to oblique to the right or left.

But the march was kept up until evening, when the troops bivouacked at the other end of the Divide and men looked each other in the face with disappointment depicted upon every countenance.

"We have the Crows' Roost Range surrounded, and will make our man-hunt there to-morrow," said Captain DeLong, and many felt cheered that in that wild retreat the outlaws would be surely found.

The next morning the whole force which had marched upon Crows' Roost Range at night, resumed the man-hunt they had so determinedly begun.

For two days they searched the Range, and it seemed that not a spot had been left unseen.

But the result was the same as at the Divide—only disappointment, for not a trace of an outlaw had been found.

"They have been driven from the country at last," said a settler.

And this was the thought that cheered all as they marched to their respective homes, though Dashing Charlie's Minute Men were deeply pained at the result.

CHAPTER LI.

GABRIELLE'S DREAD.

THERE was gloom at Fort Advance.

A shadow rested upon every face.

The reason was that Black Horse Bill appeared to have matters pretty much his own way.

The troops sent out to find him, after his escape from the coach with Gabrielle's money, had returned wholly unsuccessful.

Not a trace of a trail could be found by the scouts.

Then had come the startling tidings from the settlements of how Black Horse Bill had collected Dick Darcy's note when due, and taken the life of the unfortunate settler.

Upon the news coming to the general he had called his officers together and held a council of war.

The result was that it was decided that the sole dependence to capture the outlaw must be placed in Dashing Charlie and his men.

"If those scouts cannot capture the outlaw then no one else need try," the general had said, and this was the general belief.

"I will give Dashing Charlie *carte blanche*—to go about the capture of the outlaws in his own way," said General Wesley, and the chief of scouts had just decided that he would pick his men and start upon the trail, when again came the startling tidings of how Rupert Smythe's note had been collected when due.

The great man-hunt followed, with disappointment only as the result, and then it was decided that Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men should secretly patrol the Overland, or take what measures the chief of scouts deemed best to run down Black Horse Bill and his men.

"It is more and more my belief, Captain DeLong, that Black Horse Bill is all the band there is, sir, and I shall set to work with that idea," said Dashing Charlie.

"It may be so, Emmett, yet it is only surmise."

"I could not get Diamond Dan and Carley to camp on the trail at night, after their experience with the ghosts there, so I will have to make them scout by day along the trail, and do the night work myself with Kit Kirby, for I shall only take those three men with me."

"Well, Dashing Charlie, you know best, and go about it in your way, for, with the general, I have confidence that if Black Horse Bill is run down you will be the man who does it."

"I hope so, sir; but when is that note you gave him due?"

"I was thinking of that myself a short while since, and wondering, after his collecting the others, given by the settlers, if he would not attempt to make me pay up also as he threatened."

"He is just the man to make the attempt, sir, if he gets half a chance."

"I agree with you."

"Well, Miss Garland at once sent for more money, after being last robbed, for she is a plucky girl, and it was brought through by Racket Rube yesterday, and she turned over the amount of the note to me, saying that she wished it paid when Black Horse Bill came for it."

"Do you think she was in earnest, sir?"

"Oh, yes, for I have the money there in that desk, and she is very firm in her belief that the outlaw chief will be on hand to collect it."

"And when is it due, sir?"

"It falls due in three days, and then you know I have three days' grace on it," the captain said with a smile.

"I will try and be back, sir, before the three days of grace run out," said Dashing Charlie, as he took his leave of the captain.

Since her return Gabrielle Garland had seemed to be in an anxious mood, many thought.

She appeared to have some cause of trouble to weigh down her mind, and when asked what the matter was, by the general one day, she replied:

"It is because the note given by Captain DeLong for me has not fallen due, sir."

"I do not wonder that you dread to lose more money, Miss Gabrielle, if by any means you will have to do so."

"It is not the actual loss of the money, sir, but the thought that the outlaw chief will surely come to demand it."

"Do you really believe he would have the hardihood to do that?"

"He did it in two instances, sir, in the settlements."

"Yes, but that was different from a fort."

"It will be all the same to that man, sir, for I feel sure that he will be on hand to demand the money."

"I only hope that he will be, for then it will be our chance and he will have to pay a debt himself long due, one of his life to the hangman."

Gabrielle shuddered, but made no reply then; but afterward to herself she said:

"Gold is his god, and he will lose his life in seeking to get it."

"Yes, he will dare to come here and demand that money."

"I feel it! I know it!"

"It is the dread of my life."

CHAPTER LII.

THE STORM.

A STORM swept over the land, a couple of days after the departure of Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men upon another hunt for the Bravos of the Range.

The people in the fort huddled closer to the log fires, as the wind howled about their quarters and felt pity for the scouts who had to be out facing the tempest.

"What, going to try it to-day, Rube?" asked Captain DeLong who was an early riser, and passing the stage stand saw Racket Rube coming out to mount his box.

"Oh, yes, cap'n, we goes when we can, my critters and me."

"But the streams will be greatly swollen and I fear you will have trouble."

"Hope not, cap'n."

"Any one going with you?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"Well, Rube, if you get caught in the Crows' Roost to night, you'll hardly see ghosts out in such a storm, and I am sure it will not blow over for a couple of days."

"That's my thinkin', cap'n, about ther storm; but I hain't so sart'in about ther ghosts."

"Yer see ther ghosts hain't afeerd o' a leetle rain and wind, seeing that ther habitations is allus a leetle damp."

"But I must be off, sir."

"Well, luck to you, Rube, and if you see Dashing Charlie tell him I am ready to come at a moment's call if needed."

"Yas, sir, I tell him, and I hardly think I'd risk it in such a storm if I didn't know Dashing Charlie and his men were on the trail somewhat ter help me if I gits in too deep."

"Good-morning, cap'n," and the coach rolled off in the howling, pelting storm.

But Racket Rube was prepared for the worst of weather, as he had a storm-suit on, a hat that sheltered him completely, and knew that there was no possibility of his getting wet.

The horses did not appear to relish the storm at first, but the crack of Racket Rube's whip soon started them along at a ringing pace.

"I declar', this storm gits wuss instead o' better," said Rube, as he neared Rock Creek.

"I guess ther stream is a-boomin' j' yous, but ther horses kin swim and then ther old buss will float, so through I goes."

He just then came in sight of Rock Creek and caught sight of the usually shallow stream surging along like a torrent beyond its banks.

"Whew! she's a-whoopin' it up now and no mistake."

"Come, critturs, keep yer legs under yer and mind me, fer if we goes through here O. K. we is all serene for ther rest o' ther journey."

"I wishes tho' that Dashing Charlie or one o' his boys was here ter lend me a hand ef I gits in too deep."

"Great Caesar! my wishes is gratified, fer thar is one now."

He had just uttered the words when a horseman rode out from among the rocks.

But a better look told Rube that it was not Dashing Charlie or one of his men.

"Great Caesar's ghost! it's a Black Horse Bravol!"

He still drove on, however, and a moment after muttered:

"Yas, it's Black Horse Bill."

"I were beginning ter hope he had quit ther country."

"Ho, Rube, you are a plucky fellow to come out in such a storm," and Black Horse Bill rode along side of the coach, halting it by holding up his hand.

"Yer'll be in a wuss storm nor this, Black Heart Bill, when ther sogers coming behind me catches up."

The outlaw laughed, while he replied:

"My dear Rube, don't lie."

"In the first place, there is no escort with you this trip, and General Wesley would not send his boys out without it was necessary in such a tempest."

"Then, too, if there were any coming you would never have warned us."

"What us?"

The outlaw pointed over among the rocks where another horse and rider were visible, all huddled up facing the storm.

The driver saw the other horseman and then glanced again at the outlaw.

He was splendidly equipped for bad weather, for his horse had a rubber blanket over his saddle which completely shielded his head, neck and body.

The rider was also well supplied, as he wore high-top rubber boots, a coat of the same and a hat with a curtain and face shield to it.

"Waal, this time yer hain't alone, is yer?" said Rube.

"No; and I never am."

"Yer has one pard with yer, thet much more rope fruit when Dashing Charlie catches yer."

"If you look close you will see more what you call rope-fruit, Rube, for there are plenty of them there to render a good account even to the Minute Men."

Racket Rube did catch sight of another horse, so said:

"Waal, I hed an idea that you was all alone, Black Horse Bill."

"You must not set me down as a fool, Rube."

"But come, what have you aboard of value this morning?"

"Not ing."

"I was sorry to miss the paymaster you took through the other day, but accidents will happen, you know."

"Waal, yer did miss him."

"Yes, but I'll be in better luck next time."

"Now let me cross the ford ahead of you, so as to give you what help I can," and Black Horse Bill rode on into the stream picking out the best way for the team to follow.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SCOUTS AFTER GAME.

"WAAL, ef yer didn't do me a good tarn I'm blest," said Racket Rube, as the outlaw led the way across the stream.

"Oh, yes, I wouldn't have harm befall you, Rube, for you are my banker."

"Durn yer, I wishes I was yer killer."

The outlaw laughed.

"But I admits yer helped me jist now, saved ther whole outfit, for I'd have driv' lower down at the reg'lar crossing."

"Yes, but you noticed that the big rock had washed down and that made a hole and an eddy there which would have swamped you."

"I saw it when I crossed half an hour ago."

"Did you come from that way?" quickly asked Rube.

"Oh, yes, and Dashing Charlie and his men are hidin' among the rocks, sure I will not be out such a day as this is."

"Waal, you does beat all."

"Thanks."

"Give my compliments to Dashing Charlie, and tell him you left me at Rock Creek Ford."

"Yas, and time he gits here you is liable ter be whar he is now."

"Just so, Rube."

"Waal, I thanks yer fer yer kindness ter me anyhow jist now, and I'll ask yer ter a haugin' picnic which is set fer this evening at ther fort."

"My men are to be hanged to-day, eh?"

"Yas, at sunset, if the sun sets on sich a day as this is."

"They is all five ter be hanged, seeing as ther two wounded ones is well enough to hang."

"You betrayed yer own men, Black Horse Bill, playin' ther Mounted Tramp, and yer oughter be at ther hangin'."

"Thanks for the invitation; I guess I shall accept it."

"Yas, you will; but I won't be thar, I'm sorry ter say, but you jist go on my invite."

"I will, now I think of it."

And Black Horse Bill waved his hand as the coach drove on, and then rode on among the rocks where Racket Rube had seen the horseman.

Racket Rube drove along at a brisk pace, congratulating himself upon the escape of himself and team, and because after passing Devil's Ladder and ascending the long hill to Crows' Roost Range he would have passed the greatest dangers of his trail.

"It's lucky I hain't goin' t'other way, down ther Devil's Ladder and Crows' Roost Hill in this storm," he muttered.

Then, with just pride at what he was doing, he said:

"They won't expect me at ther station ter come through on sich a day.

"I hopes I'll meet Dashing Charlie, or some of his men, ter set them on ther outlaws at ther ford."

Up Devil's Ladder Rube went in safety, and then followed the crossing of several rivulets swollen into torrents, and next the climb up the dangerous hill of Crows' Roost.

He passed the Outlaws' Rocks, and was nearing Mountain Spring, when suddenly a form glided out into the road before him.

"Dashing Charlie hain't hiding so close as Black Horse Bill thought he was," muttered Racket Rube, as he recognized the chief of scouts.

There stood Dashing Charlie enveloped in his storm coat and high boots, and with his sombrero pulled down to shelter him from the pelting rain.

"Ho, Charlie, I hed a sneakin' idee I'd see yer."

"Yes, Rube, but I did not believe you would attempt to come through, and it's true grit in you to do it."

"I concluded I'd come, as I hasn't lost a day in the year."

"How did you cross Rock Creek?"

"She were a-booming, but I hed a pilot thar."

"A pilot?"

"Yes, a guide."

"Who was it?"

"A gent who showed me the way across, being as the stream had undermined the big rock and made it tumble, and the current was awful bad thar."

"But for that gent I'd have lost ther team, ther huss and all."

"You were fortunate to find someone."

"Oh, he were a-lookin' fer me, Charlie, fer it were Black Horse Bill."

"The deuce you say!" and wheeling toward the rocks Dashing Charlie called out:

"Ho, pard, mount and be ready, for our game is not far away."

"Diamond Dan, bring my horse with you, please, while I talk to Rube."

A cheer answered the words of their chief, and the men hastened to saddle up, and in five minutes were ready for the trail.

Dashing Charlie meanwhile had heard all that Racket Rube had to tell, and as he drove on the scouts went off at a gallop for the Rock Creek Ford, for the storm had no terrors for them when there were outlaws to fight.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE MIDNIGHT MESSENGER.

THE storm did not abate its fury in the least during the day, and as night came on grew more furious.

Officers and men at the fort were glad to keep in out of the elements, and ruddy log-fires were burning brightly in most of the quarters, for the autumn was setting in and the nights were becoming chilly.

The sentinels hunted the lee of the stockade-wall, and all were glad to keep sheltered as much as possible.

The post of the lookout on the tower that night was a sinecure, for he could not see ten steps away.

It was therefore a surprise, and a startling one to the sentinel in the sentry-box just outside the stockade-gate, when he could see no one, to suddenly hear a call.

"Ho, sentinel!"

"Halt! who comes there?" cried the startled sentinel, and he sprang out of his box, to confront a man on horseback who had ridden up to his post.

"I am a settler bearing a message to Captain DeLong from Dashing Charlie, and I wish to see him at once."

"Corporal of the guard! Post Number One!" called out the sentry, and the corporal growled at being disturbed and forced to go out upon such a night.

But he went, and heard what the courier had to say, so referred the matter to the sergeant who admitted the man and conducted him to the quarters of Captain DeLong.

The captain had not retired, and was seated alone in his cozy library reading, and congratulating himself that he had not to go out on such a night, when he heard the rain driving against the windows and the wind whistling around the corners of the house.

"You can find your way back, sir, if you have to return, for that light is where the gate is," said the sergeant to the courier, and then he knocked at the door.

Captain DeLong opened it and said:

"What, a courier on such a night!"

"Come in, my man, and throw off your wraps."

"Thank you, sir, but I come on an important errand from Dashing Charlie, and must return to-night, sir—immediately, in fact."

"You are a brave fellow to face this storm;

but you are not one of the Minute Men, are you, as I cannot tell, muffled up as you are?"

"No, sir, I am a settler, Rupert Smythe, and—"

"Ah! you are the settler whom Black Horse Bill forced to pay that note he robbed a man of?"

"Yes, sir, I am the man, and I have a clue to where the retreat of the Bravos is, and I was coming to the fort when I met Dashing Charlie and told him what I knew."

"So he told me to come on and report to you, asking you to please come to-morrow to Crows' Roost with twenty men and meet him there, for Black Horse Bill has more men than the scout wishes to tackle only with his own men, as he says not one must escape."

"This is news indeed; but you can remain and go with me to-morrow?"

"No, sir, for I am to go back at once and guide Dashing Charlie and his men to a spot where they can surround the retreat; but will you write him a line, sir, saying when you will be there and what force you will bring?"

"Certainly, if you wish it, as soon as I have given you a drink of brandy, for you need it."

The captain passed on into the dining-room and returned with a decanter and glass, the messenger helping himself generously and saying:

"Your very good health, Captain DeLong, and I hope we'll catch the outlaws so I can get my money back."

"I hope so; but it is lucky he did not make me a visit, as I would have been held up for my note, which is ten thousand dollars, and under the muzzle of a revolver he would have gotten it too, as I happen to have the money here; but I will write that note to Dashing Charlie."

The captain opened his desk and seating himself began to write.

Just as he finished the note the messenger laid something down on the desk by his side with the low, sternly-uttered words:

"That note is due to-day, Captain DeLong, and it is your money or your life!"

There was no mistaking the words or the threatening action of the man.

He had his revolver full against the head of Captain DeLong.

The officer was in his dressing-gown and slippers, and the doors were closed, his wife and Gabrielle having retired an hour before.

In that howling storm his call could not have been heard even, and besides the two ladies there was no one to call upon.

"Captain DeLong, I am a desperate man and I will do as I say."

"You gave me that note and I trusted you with the jewels of Miss Garland."

"It was a business transaction between us, and you owe me that reward, and unless you pay it I will kill you and rob your desk, yes, shoot your wife or whoever comes to your aid."

"I can readily reach the gate, and once outside your whole force could not catch me."

"Will you pay that bill or take the consequences?"

"I will pay the bill," was the stern rejoinder of DeLong, who felt his helplessness not to do so, and yet was pleased with the thought that the robber was not yet out of the fort with his plunder.

"I felt sure that you would do so, Captain DeLong, for you are not the man to take money from a poor man, when it has been honestly earned as a reward for returning lost jewels."

"I shall give you a good name, sir."

"Thank you! don't trouble yourself upon my account."

"But I shall pay you the money—redeem my note as promised."

And Captain DeLong took a key from his pocket, unlocked an inner drawer of the desk at which he sat, and there before the eyes of the outlaw lay the packages of new, crisp bills, to the amount of ten thousand dollars.

CHAPTER LV.

A CLEVER RETREAT.

CAPTAIN DeLong's thoughts were very busy while he was unlocking the secret drawer and taking out the money.

He intended to pay the reward, redeem his note, yes; but after that was done, he hoped to be able to act in a way that would prevent the escape of the outlaw.

"Here is the amount of the reward, sir, just ten thousand dollars, and this redeems my note."

"So it does; but how thoughtless in me not to have written on that note that it was interest-bearing, for at ten per cent, a year, for one month on the amount I would have had quite a little sum added."

"Yes, it was a mistake of yours to cheat yourself out of nearly a hundred dollars; but the money is there for you to count."

"Thank you, no; I'll take your word for it, captain."

"You will find it correct, for Miss Garland seemed to feel that you would come after your reward, so left the sum with me."

"Indeed, she seems to know me well, then."

"So it seems," and Captain DeLong looked the man fixedly in the eyes.

But his gaze was met unflinchingly, and then the officer said:

"Well, Sir Robber, have you any other business to transact with me?"

"There is your note and I have the money," and the outlaw slipped it into a pocket of his storm-coat with one hand, still keeping his revolver covering the captain with the other.

"Yes, we are both satisfied, so I will bid you good-evening."

The outlaw smiled and said:

"How strange, for here you have been anxious to get me into the fort, and now you are just as anxious to get rid of me."

"I am anxious to rid myself of your presence," was the stern response.

"Well, captain, one favor more and I have done."

"Well, sir?"

"I note that the dining-room door opening into the hall is next to that one leading from the library, so as you cannot get out to give an alarm, without my killing you, I will ask for another glass of that very fine old brandy of yours, if you please, for I have a long, rough ride before me."

Captain DeLong hesitated an instant and then said:

"You are my guest, so I cannot be inhospitable even to Black Horse Bill the outlaw."

"You are very kind, but remember a bolt will bring a shot, and I will kill whoever comes to the rescue, even if it be a woman."

"Once I have turned my back upon you door, then you are at liberty to catch me if you can."

"That is fair."

"Perfectly so, as I am one against a thousand; but the brandy, please."

Captain DeLong passed on into the dining-room, but the instant he did so the outlaw slipped out of the library door, then out of the front door turning the key after him.

Like a deer then he ran to the stockade gate, knowing no one would see him in that driving rain.

"Thank you, corporal, for caring for my horse."

"I must hurry, for there is trouble brewing and I have a rough ride ahead of me."

"Good-night," and the daring outlaw leaped into his saddle, the corporal threw open the gate, and like an arrow the splendid horse bounded through just as a ringing voice called out in commanding tones:

"Ho, the guard!"

"Halt that man, or kill him!"

"It is Black Horse Bill!"

Captain DeLong had been delayed a couple of minutes, in getting a glass and the brandy, for he had determined, having seen the size of the drink the outlaw had taken, to mix liquors upon him.

He therefore poured into the brandy decanter, which had but a small quantity in it, a glass of whisky and as much absinthe, hoping that the mixed liquors, with what the man had already taken would quickly upset him, or at least prevent his escape though he might get out of the fort.

When he returned with the decanter and glass to the library he saw that it was empty.

Quickly placing the things upon a table he sprang to the door, and found it locked.

Then he had to run around into the hall through the dining-room, and bare-headed and in dressing-gown and slippers as he was, he started to run out of the front door into the storm.

But the outer door was also locked.

Then he darted back through the hall to the rear door, calling out loudly:

"Ho, Eloise, Gabrielle, Black Horse Bill is in the fort!"

CHAPTER LVI.

THE PURSUIT.

THE back door of the captain's quarters was locked, but quickly opening it the officer dashed out into the storm, ran around to the front, and then down toward the stockade-gate like a deer.

As he drew near he saw the outlaw just riding out, and loud rung his command to halt or kill him.

The bewildered corporal did not quite catch the meaning of the order, and when the captain arrived he dashed out of the gate, seized the amazed sentinel's musket and aiming at the fast retreating horse, fired.

But the horse held on apparently unhurt, while Captain DeLong called out:

"Quick, corporal! give a general alarm, and order my troop in the saddle at once, for that man was Black Horse Bill!"

Then the captain left the amazed corporal and returned to his quarters while the alarm resounded through the fort.

Drenched through, Captain DeLong reached his quarters, to be met by his wife and Eloise, who had risen in alarm and hastily thrown on their wrappers, but half-catching the words of the officer as he left the house.

"Oh, Abner, what does it all mean?" cried Mrs. DeLong.

"Black Horse Bill has been here, did you not say?" asked Gabrielle.

"Yes, and forced me, at the revolver's muzzle, to pay over the money."

"But I have ordered my troop in the saddle—so must get ready at once to go in pursuit of him," and Captain DeLong hastened to his room.

To make a complete change with him was but a few minutes' work, and he came into the library, booted and spurred, with storm-coat on and all ready just as a lieutenant appeared and reported:

"Troop in the saddle, sir, and all ready at the gate."

"All right, Verne, I will go with you," and with a hasty farewell to his wife and Eloise the captain left his quarters, mounted his horse, held by his servant at the door, and in just fifteen minutes after the escape of Black Horse Bill, the gallant captain at the head of his men rode out of the fort.

"He must go one of three trails, so divide into three squadrons and push ahead with all speed."

"A scout will lead each one and the horses must not be spared," were Captain DeLong's orders, and placing himself at the head of one party, with Lieutenants Verne and Griswold leading the others, the troop divided and went away at a gallop, unmindful of the driving rain, mud and howling winds, with Black Horse Bill the game to be run down.

The captain took the trail with his men direct to Crows' Roost Range, for he believed that the outlaw would go that way, and he was anxious to enlist Dashing Charlie in the pursuit, and hoped to find him in that neighborhood.

"If I could only have given him that drink, he would not have gone far that is certain."

"I forgot to tell Eloise what I had done, and some of Gabrielle's beaux will take the excitement as an excuse to drop in, and of course they will have to take a drink on such a night as this, and that will settle them."

"I hope the officer of the day won't call, for if he does he's a goner," and the captain laughed in spite of his regret at not having been able to give the outlaw the drink he had concocted.

The storm still held on with unabated fury and the soldiers could not help to suffer, as well as their horses; but there was no murmuring, and all followed unhesitatingly their gallant captain.

An hour before dawn came they reached Rock Creek Ford, and it was fortunate for them that suddenly there rang out a voice, calling:

"Halt! who comes there?"

"Dashing Charlie!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Is that you, Captain DeLong?"

"Yes, and I am glad to meet you here, for I expected to have to go on to Crows' Roost."

"It's a bad night, sir, to be out."

"Is there anything wrong at the fort?"

"Only that Black Horse Bill has been there."

"Black Horse Bill has been at the fort, sir?" asked Dashing Charlie in utter amazement at what he had heard.

"It is true, and more, he came for his reward and got it."

"We were in chase fifteen minutes after he escaped, and I have parties under Verne and Griswold on the trails leading to the Divide and Black Mountain."

"I tell you, Dashing Charlie, I admire that man Black Horse Bill immensely for his daring, nerve and cleverness."

"Why, sir, he held-up Racket Rube yesterday, right here at the ford, and when Rube told me, for I was at Crow's Roost, I came here at once, but could find no trace of him or his men, for he has followers, sir, as Rube saw them this time."

"We must capture them all, Dashing Charlie; but as he has not passed this way we will go into camp and have breakfast, while we decide what is best to be done," and the order was given to camp for breakfast, an order the troops very gladly obeyed.

CHAPTER LVII.

COUNTING HIS GAINS.

WHEN Black Horse Bill rode out of the fort he sent his horse off like a bullet.

He knew his danger, and that if the guard could be gotten through the gate in time by Captain DeLong that he would have to run the gantlet of a dozen or more shots.

If he escaped, his horse might be killed or wounded, and that would place him on foot in a very dangerous locality.

But he was unhurt by the shot of Captain DeLong, though the bullet passed through his hat.

"A good shot that," he muttered, and as he rode on he chuckled at his escape and success in getting the money.

"Now I can afford to give up this desperate life, so I will not seek to get more money, as the risk will be too great."

"But there is a little debt of revenge to pay yet, as I shall put a bullet into Racket Rube and one into Dashing Charlie."

"Yes, and one other."

"Then I will be ready to give up my life here, forget the past, and in another land to live like a gentleman."

So mused the outlaw as he rode on his way through the rain, which beat upon him unmercifully,

driven by the wind with a force that made his horse bow his head to escape the fierce blasts.

The outlaw, having gotten out of sight of the lights of the fort, did not follow any trail, but held on directly toward the Divide.

"This storm will quickly wash away every trace of my trail, and they might as well attempt to find a needle in a haystack as to look for me when daylight comes."

"The very night for my work was this, and Fate is good to me at times."

"Yes, I have been very fortunate of late."

"Now to go to my retreat and remain in hiding for several days."

He kept up his pace into the timber, the horse holding on unswervingly, and at last halting at the old cabin against the cliff before referred to.

Arriving at the cabin the outlaw gave a sigh of relief, but quickly drew out the swinging wall and entered the cavern behind it, leading his horse in after him.

He found matches, and lighting a lamp went along on foot, his horse faithfully following him.

To the little basin among the cliffs he went, where the log-but was, and after putting his horse under the shed-shelter and looking to his comfort, he began to care for himself.

A fire was built in the chimney and a couple of candles lighted and placed upon the table.

Then the outlaw cooked his supper, or rather his breakfast for it was daybreak then.

Eating heartily he threw himself upon his blankets and sunk to sleep like a very tired man.

The storm held on without during the day, but toward nightfall there were rifts in the western skies and the sun peered through, presaging a clear day on the morrow.

Black Horse Bill arose from his blankets, refreshed himself by a bath in the sheltered spring near the cabin and then staked his horse out to feed on the little meadow land.

Then he set to work preparing his supper, after which he placed a light upon the table and going to a secret recess among the rocks brought out a couple of buckskin bags.

"Now to the pleasing task of counting my riches," he said gleefully, like one whose idol was gold.

In one of the bags were the jewelry and other things he had taken from the hiding-place in the retreat of his band, and these were poured out upon the rough board table.

A piece of paper and pencil were placed near, and then, with the eye of a good judge of values, the outlaw began to set down the prices the articles would average when placed on sale.

Watches and chains, both large and small, earrings, bracelets, breastpins, studs and finger-rings with a number of other trinkets were set down with a price opposite to each.

"These foot up three thousand dollars," he muttered, and then he poured out a bag of gold coin and counting it, added the amount to the other.

A bag heavy with silver coins came next, then a few small nuggets of gold, some gold grains, and then a roll of well-worn bills.

Adding the value of all up he said with marked satisfaction:

"Just fifteen thousand dollars."

"But for my getting the money from Gabrielle, that would have been my fortune."

"Now to the total."

He placed the money he had gotten from the unfortunate clerk, with that he had robbed Gabrielle of, and the reward paid him by Captain DeLong together, and counting all up said complacently:

"Eighty thousand dollars."

"Not so bad after all to start life anew on."

"Now to place it away securely, and then to start upon my trail of revenge."

"This done, I go my way, and fortunately my riches are not so bulky but that I can carry them."

He put all of his treasure together and then hid it in a crevice among the rocks, after which he said:

"Now to pay a visit to my other retreat."

And taking his lantern he left the cabin, crossed the basin and entered another cave, the entrance to which was concealed by bushes.

CHAPTER LVIII.

A PRISONER.

THERE were numerous tunnels, or caverns, among the mountains surrounding Fort Advance, and it was the knowledge of these which enabled Black Horse Bill to so mysteriously elude his pursuers, and all attempts to hunt him down.

He had not even let his men into the secret of these caverns, keeping them for his own use alone, when there was need of retreating to them.

So ingeniously concealed were the entrances and exits of these caves that the most skillful scout would not suspect their existence.

There were in the Divide several such caverns

known to Black Horse Bill, and the reader has seen how well the entrance through the cabin wall was hidden.

Leaving his second cabin, in the little basin among the cliffs, he entered the cave running to the eastward, and lantern in hand followed its windings for a mile or more.

It gradually led upward, and at last he came out in a large underground chamber, the walls of which glimmered under the flashes of his lantern.

That the spot was used as a habitation, the surroundings showed.

There was a fire in one end, with wood piled up near, two beds of buffalo and bear robes, some cooking utensils, a quantity of game hanging up, and a few other things scattered about.

Upon one of the robe beds the form of a man was reclining, and as the outlaw came near he raised his head and said quietly:

"Well, back again, I see."

"Oh yes."

"You have been gone so long that I thought you might have been shot, or captured and hanged."

"Not I, for there is a special Providence that protects my life."

The man on the bed of robes laughed, but made no reply.

"Where is the Indian?"

"He has not returned from hunting and fishing yet."

"It is time, and what he gets must last for some days, for I will have no shooting done about here now, as it is too dangerous."

"Any greater danger than usual?"

"Yes, for I went to the fort last night, and got the reward offered for the fair Gabrielle's jewels."

"You went to the fort?" asked the man on the robes, in a surprised tone.

"I did."

"And got that reward?"

"Yes, so I have a fortune of eighty thousand dollars."

"I am in luck, am I not?"

"You certainly are in luck."

"Well, I have come to see you to tell you what I have decided to do."

"Yes."

"I am not going to take any more chances at robbery, only a couple at getting my revenge."

"Upon whom?"

"Dashing Charlie, for one."

"And who else?"

"Racket Rube."

"Any one else?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I'll tell you; but I wish that Indian would come."

"He will be here soon!"

"When he comes I intend to tell you my plans, and who the third person is I seek revenge upon."

"Yes, I suppose I am interested."

"You are."

Just then there glided into the cavern, from the other direction from which the outlaw had entered, the tall form of a Sioux Indian.

"Ho, chief, I am glad you have come, for I have work for you to do."

"All right."

"Have plenty game," and the Indian threw down by the fire a string of fish, a haunch of venison and some birds.

"Have some supper!" he asked in very fair English.

"No, I had my supper in the other cabin."

"All right, more for chief and him," was the laconic response, and the chief pointed toward the man upon the robe bed.

"Where are the horses?"

"In the valley now."

"I suppose they are safe there, though I fear they might be discovered, for my idea is that this whole range is to be searched as it was before, and next time the horses might be found."

"You had better bring them to the cavern, for then I know they will be safe."

"All right, me hear."

"I am going to-night to the Crows' Roost Cave, and in two days I wish you to join me there, chief."

"All right, me come."

"But how him come?" and the chief motioned to the reclining form, for the man had not moved his position since the arrival of the outlaw.

"He must stay here, so you bring all the plunder and both the horses."

"The coach goes back to-morrow, and Racket Rube must die, and from Dashing Charlie's camp at night I can pick him off, for he is the only one who dares face the ghosts and stay there, as I have discovered."

"Leave him!" asked the Indian.

"Yes, leave him there to die of starvation, all ironed as he is," was the malignant reply, and with a bitter laugh, Black Horse Bill walked over and looked exultantly down upon the man who lay at his feet, and who now, by a movement of his arms revealed the fact that he was ironed hand and foot.

"All right; you say him die, he die," was the cool response of the Indian, who went on with his work of preparing supper for himself, to look up suddenly and ask:

"Him have no supper?"

"Not a morsel of food or drink shall again pass his lips."

"All right."

And the Indian seemed pleased at the thought of the sufferings of the pale-face prisoner.

CHAPTER LX.

LYING IN WAIT.

BACK to his retreat in the hut in the basin among the cliffs went Black Horse Bill when he had gloated over the prisoner in his revenge upon him and told the Indian just what he wished him to do.

He got out his treasure again and counted it over once more, like a miser enjoying the chink of the gold and silver and feasting his eyes upon his riches, while he muttered, again and again:

"All mine! all mine!"

At last he began his preparations for his journey to Crows' Roost, got his traps together, saddled his horse, and left the cabin where he had found so safe a retreat from those who thirsted for his life.

He left the cabin by the way he had come and turned the head of his horse toward Crows' Roost, taking a trail that would lead him by Devil's Ladder.

It was not yet day when he reached the Overland Trail, and, turning short off from Devil's Ladder, he rode into a thicket growing about the base of the cliff, and clinging into the crevices of the rocks with seemingly nothing in the shape of soil to nurture them.

Pushing aside the bushes another cave was revealed, and into this he went, his horse following as though he knew what was expected of him.

The lighting of a match revealed a lantern on the rocky floor, and when this was lighted the outlaw pushed boldly on through the cave, which was high and wide.

A walk of a short distance brought him to where there was a pool of water and a large bundle of hay.

There was a pen of logs there also, and into this the horse was turned loose and hay given him, while he could also get water.

"We will not have to remain many days, old horse," he said, as he turned away leaving the animal in darkness.

A walk of half an hour, following the cave which harrowed as he went on, brought him to a steep ascent, and seeing a glimmer of light above he put out his lantern.

Then he climbed up the rocky wall to what appeared to be a cave of rocks with here and there a crevice in it.

Near the top was a rope ladder coiled up, and by moving a large flat stone the daylight streamed in.

Cautiously the outlaw peered out, and his eyes fell upon what was known as the Outlaws' Rocks.

Then the secret came out of why the scouts had never been able to find a trail leading to and from the spot, and one might have stood upon the rocky pinnacle and never dreamed of a cave hidden under that flat rock and the scrub bushes growing upon the summit.

"I will have time for a good nap before Racket Rube comes along, and then to-night I will look after Dashing Charlie," the man muttered.

Slipping back into the opening he replaced the rock and descended to the rocky floor below, where he turned to the right where there was quite a space in which was a blanket bed, and some other articles that went to make him comfortable.

Throwing himself down upon the blankets he ate a cold breakfast and then laid down to rest.

It was several hours before he awoke.

When he did so it was with a start, and looking at his watch he said:

"I have just time to go into position to halt him."

He clambered up the rocks again, raised the flat stone and stepped out.

Taking the rope ladder he lowered it from the summit of the rock and went down it, taking his rifle with him and having on his belt of revolvers.

His face was set and stern now, and he seemed determined to show no mercy toward the man he had vowed to be avenged upon, and simply because he had never made him quail before his lawless acts.

Slipping away the boulders he gained a position near the trail and there coolly sat down to await the coming of Racket Rube's coach.

Time passed slowly to the waiting man, but yet he showed no impatience.

He had trained himself so well to watch and wait that time was nothing to him.

At last he looked at his watch, and rising, grasped his rifle, while he said:

"Racket Rube to-day, and Dashing Charlie to-night, for then I know he patrols this range."

"Now, Racket Rube, your doom is sealed."

CHAPTER LX.

THE OUTLAW'S OATH.

THOUGH Black Horse Bill, the Outlaw, stood ready for his victim when he came along, for some reason it seemed that Racket Rube, always as punctual as clockwork, was now behind time.

At last, as half an hour, then an hour passed, and Rube's coach did not appear, and the keen ears of the outlaw could not detect the slightest sound to indicate the rumbling of wheels, he showed his first signs of impatience.

He looked at his watch again and again, bit his lips, stamped his feet and at last said, in an angry tone:

"Two hours late."

"What does it mean?"

"Surely, no one can have held him up, for I alone have that right on this trail, though Racket Rube did fool me once into believing he had been held up and robbed by some one else, and at this very place."

"I should have known better when he told me what he did."

"I cannot understand this delay, though."

With this he took up his rifle and walked out into the trail.

Something on the ground attracted his attention and, springing forward with a bitter oath, he cried:

"By the gods of war! but he's gone by!"

"Yes, he was ahead of time, instead of behind, and came by some minutes before I came out to lie in wait for him."

"Curses upon my luck!"

"Fortune is surely not going to desert me now in the moment of my successful debut in life."

"No, no! that must not be."

He examined the roadway carefully, and then said:

"Yes, there is his trail going westward, and fresh."

"He was traveling feet, too."

"I should not have missed him, for now I will have to await his return trip, and then perhaps the coach may have an escort of soldiers."

"Well, I will go to the scouts' camp over yonder and see if there is any sign of recent occupancy."

He walked up the trail to where the group of rocks were where Diamond Dan and Curley had made their camp and seen the white-robed forms, and after them Dashing Charlie.

There was a pile of fresh ashes there, showing that some one had been there the night before, and since the storm.

"Yes, Dashing Charlie was here last night, and will return to night."

"I can pick him off, and then wait for Racket Rube on his return trip, for those two men must die."

"I would not enjoy my money unless I knew that they were dead, and that the man I left to the tender mercies of the Indian was also in his grave."

"Now to go back and rest up for the night's work."

He retraced his steps to the rope ladder, ascended to the top of the rock and drew up his ladder after him.

The rock was replaced with care, and then he went to another part of the cave and cooked his dinner, apparently enjoying it.

Returning with his lantern by the spot where his horse was, he gave him some hay and then retraced his steps to where his blankets were and lay down to rest, after lighting a fresh candle and placing it in his lantern.

To his surprise, he did not drop off at once to sleep, but moved about restlessly for an hour or more.

At last sleep came to him, and when he awoke night had come on.

He ate the remains of his dinner for supper, and drank a tin cup full of strong coffee, as though to brace his nerves.

Then he unrolled a blanket in which there were several sheets and white garments.

One of the latter he put on, and putting out his lantern went up to the top of the rock, moved the stone and stepped out.

Down the rope ladder he went, his rifle hanging to his side by a strap, and just where he had waited for Racket Rube to come along he sat down and again waited.

The moon did not rise until after ten o'clock, but at last it peered up over the mountains and soared into a cloudless sky.

After waiting for some time longer he took up something which lay at his feet, and which seemed quite heavy.

It was painted white, and was in the shape of a helmet.

This he placed upon his head, and throwing a sheet over him he arose and stalked boldly out into the trail.

"I take big chances," he muttered, "for a bullet might catch me in the face and kill me in spite of my iron helmet and woven steel shirt."

"But one who lives the life I do must risk much, and what I have risked for gold I can now do for revenge."

With this he strolled on down the trail, looking weird and spectral in the moonlight.

He had reached the spot opposite the group of graves, when suddenly came the loud command:

"Come, pard, we'll catch that ghost alive!"

And out from among the rocks bounded Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men.

But the "ghost" was off with a bound and disappeared in the pine thicket just back of the graves, and running around the hill came up to the Outlaw Rocks, ascended the rope ladder and was safe.

Once within the cave he shook his fist toward the spot where the scouts were, and said savagely:

"You are doomed, Dashing Charlie, you and Racket Rube, for I will kill you if I have to again visit the fort to do so."

"I swear it!"

CHAPTER LXI.

CAPTAIN DELONG TELLS HIS STORY.

As the reader is aware the hunt in the storm after Black Horse Bill was without results.

The two parties of troopers, under Lieutenants Verne and Griswold, returned to the fort worn out, both men and horses.

They had been on the move all day in the pelting rain and at last, finding no trail, or clew, each officer decided to return.

They reached the fort soon after dark and at about the same time.

Captain DeLong, however, having joined forces with Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men, for the latter had been withdrawn from the Divide, except two scouts who were to remain and report anything of a suspicious nature, decided to go on with the hunt as long as there was the slightest chance of success.

What Racket Rube had told Dashing Charlie about seeing other outlaws was convincing proof, at least, that the outlaw was not alone, and, of course, these men must be lying in concealment somewhere within easy ride of the fort.

Where they were Black Horse Bill must have gone, and it seemed most natural that their retreat was in the vicinity of the Devil's Ladder or Crows' Roost Range.

There, near the Outlaws' Rocks, had the white-robed forms appeared by night to the scouts, and taking all in all, Captain DeLong and Dashing Charlie reasoned well in deciding that the plan to hunt for the outlaws was on the Overland Trail, between Mountain Spring and Rock Creek Ford.

So the men were distributed along the trail and a search was begun.

But after the day and night passed there, with his men on short rations, and wet and uncomfortable, Captain DeLong came to the conclusion that he would return to the fort, and leave Dashing Charlie to cover the field.

"I am on the trail to camp, until called in by orders, sir," said Dashing Charlie to Captain DeLong.

"All right, Charlie, stay until you are needed, or we get news, and I will send you word."

"But what about those ghosts of the Crows' Roost?"

"Diamond Dan and Curley say they'll go up there at night, if all the boys will, and though you know I stayed last night alone, I saw nothing, so we will all go to-night, except one man I will leave at Rock Creek, another at Devil's Ladder, and a third at the Valley Trails to report anything that may turn up."

And you with the others will go ghost-hunting?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know of no better plan, Charlie, and with your command thus divided and the two over in the Divide, they must certainly make some discovery soon."

"I certainly think so, sir," and Dashing Charlie saluted as Captain DeLong rode back toward the fort.

It was in the afternoon when he was reported in sight, returning with his men, and much interest was felt by all to know the result of his going.

Glasses scanned the horsemen to note if there was a prisoner among them.

Captain DeLong had hastily told his wife what had occurred, between himself and the outlaw, and asked her to report it to the general the next morning.

The sentinel, corporal and sergeant had in their turn reported the coming of the horseman, the story he had told, his going to Captain DeLong's house and what had followed.

There was a feeling of intense amazement and indignation in the fort, that Black Horse Bill had defied them all by daring to come to the fort; and that he had, with everything in his favor, been successful in getting the money he had come to demand, was not to be wondered at.

But that, with everything against him, he had escaped after getting the money, was the wonder.

So all were anxious to hear the captain's story.

Immediately upon his arrival he went to headquarters and reported to the general who said:

"Well, DeLong, you certainly have had an experience. Tell me of it."

"It was the experience of my life, general.

"Why, the fellow pretended to be the settler, Rupert Smythe, whose note Black Horse Bill had collected, you remember, and he told me a ghost story about having been sent to me by Dashing Charlie who wished me to meet him and all that, to capture the outlaws.

"I could not see the fellow, muffled up as he was, swallowed the bait, gave him a drink of brandy and then was coolly told, with a revolver to my head, that my note was due and must be paid.

"The fellow put me upon my honor, told me he had taken my note for his reward, had trusted me with the jewels, and so I handed over the money."

"I do not blame you, DeLong," said the general.

And when he heard the captain's story of his intended capture of the outlaw by getting him drunk, he laughed heartily.

"Well, he is a bold fellow, DeLong, and has eluded us at every turn; but we will yet run him down, as he is so determined to remain on the frontier."

"If he has not now gone, sir," was the response of the captain.

CHAPTER LXII.

GABRIELLE'S CONFESSION.

WHEN Captain DeLong left the general he went at once to his own quarters, where he was warmly greeted.

After making his toilet and having dinner, Gabrielle said:

"May I ask, Eloise, that you refuse visitors this evening? for I have something to tell you and Captain DeLong."

"Certainly, Gabrielle," was Mrs. DeLong's response, for she had noticed ever since the return of the maiden that she had been worried about something which she did not speak to her about.

So the library was left in darkness, also the hall, and the three adjourned to Mrs. DeLong's pleasant room to hear what Gabrielle had to say.

"I must go back into my past, Abner, for you do not know it all, and you can smoke your cigar if you wish, to prevent any profanity on your part at what you may have to listen to," said Gabrielle, with a sad smile.

Captain DeLong lighted a cigar, threw himself into an easy-chair, and said:

"I am ready, Gabie."

"You must know that my father married a widow with a son, for the brother you knew as Raleigh Garland was only a half-brother, and his name was Garnett."

"He was a bright, handsome boy, and I was much attached to him, for he was kind to me in those younger days."

"My father loved him so dearly that he persuaded our mother to let him take the name of Garland and be a co-equal heir with me in all things."

"Raleigh had a chum who was the very image of him, for in fact they were known as 'The Twins.'"

"They were devoted to each other, and Prevost Preston, for such was his name, even when a boy, won my heart."

"I began to study human nature early, and I soon saw that Prevost Preston was far more of a man than was Raleigh."

"He took his punishments for him, when Raleigh had done things to deserve punishment, and never told a story about his own acts, where the one he befriended often did."

"They went off to boarding-school together, and there Prevost Preston always showed the noble fellow, while Raleigh did not."

"One vacation they came home, and all we young people had a week of merrymaking, and even then Raleigh plotted mischief, for when Prevost and I entered into a mock marriage, he had the gardener perform the service, when the man was a Methodist minister, who had been exiled from the church for some act."

"Raleigh's motive was to have my father send me to a convent for my act, saying that I knew what I was doing, and thus work to get the full control of the estates."

"This marriage, however, was kept secret from my parents, for the gardener confessed all to me and threatened to make the truth known to my father if Raleigh dared tell of the secret."

"Prevost then went to West Point as a cadet, and soon after Raleigh got his appointment there; but he had already begun to live a fast life, and a coldness had come between the two friends."

"You are aware that Prevost Preston left West Point under a cloud, a disgraced cadet, and he went to Mexico, I heard, and then it was reported that he was dead, and again that he had taken to outlawry and had been hanged in Texas by a Vigilance Committee."

"But not one word of his evil deeds do I believe, nor will I ever do so, for his was no nature to commit crime, whatever the incentive, and dead or alive I shall ever love him; and never believe he was guilty of the charge that disgraced him as a cadet, and which was no

more nor less than stealing money from a brother cadet."

"And now to Raleigh Garnett."

"He too was expelled from West Point for some act that sent him away in disgrace."

"He went from bad to worse, gambled, killed a man over a game of cards and fled."

"He was also a forger."

"When dying my father disinherited him, for he had broken his mother's heart, and left me all of his large fortune."

"Now comes the saddest part of my story, the infamy of the man I once knew as my brother."

"You know that my jewels were returned to me, through you, Captain DeLong, and among them were miniature likenesses of my parents, and of Prevost Preston."

"And more, there was the wedding-ring which he had placed upon my finger when I was but a girl of fourteen and he a youth under eighteen."

"They were worth a fortune to me, the ring and the likenesses, and in the little gold box which you did not know how to open, Abner, was the certificate of marriage which I made the man who married us give me."

"But the man who robbed me of these things, let me now tell you, was my brother, Raleigh—now known as Black Horse Bill."

CHAPTER LXIII.

COUNTERMANDING ORDERS.

To say that Captain DeLong and his wife were startled by the confession of Gabrielle Garland, would be to draw it mildly.

They were actually astounded.

The fact of her early marriage Mrs. DeLong knew, and the captain was aware that she had had a brother who was dismissed from West Point, and was known as a very evil character. Gabrielle never spoke of him, and so his name was never mentioned before her.

The captain also suspected that she had had some sad love affair in her earlier maidenhood, and supposed that she would never marry.

He loved her as dearly as he would his own sister, and was happy to have her an inmate of his house.

But when she told of her robbery being at the hand of that wicked brother, and how she had also been robbed by him in the coach, and knew what he was, their amazement knew no bounds.

They talked over the whole affair, of Gabrielle's kindness to the pretended old man, who proved to be her brother, planning to rob her again.

He had returned the jewels, knowing from what he saw among them, that she would give the liberal reward offered.

"The only thing that surprises me, is that he did not demand fifty thousand dollars for those things, for I would have given every dollar of it," Gabrielle said firmly.

"Now the question is, Gabrielle, as to what is best to be done about this man," said Captain DeLong, when he had pondered over the affair, and heard it in all its pros and cons.

"How do you mean, Abner?" asked Mrs. DeLong, as Gabrielle said nothing.

"If the man is captured he will at once make his relationship to you known, Gabrielle."

"Oh, yes, I am sure of that."

"Nothing can keep such a nature from striking you that cruel blow as his last act, to say that you are his sister."

"Yes, he will do it."

"Now there is no need of beating about the bush, so I will come at once to the point and tell you that there is no hope for him."

"No, if you mean that he will be put to death."

"I do mean it, and his death will be at the rope's end."

"He will deserve it."

"Granted, a hundred times, if for no other reason than his treatment to you."

"But you do not wish the shame of his execution."

"It cannot be helped."

"Oh, yes, it might."

"I do not see how; but I can only say that he is my half-brother, and I will face the result, trying all I can to cheer his last moments and make him repent."

"Nobly said, my dear girl, but if you were to go near that wretch I would cut your acquaintance."

"No, no; there is not one atom of repentance in him, and all I can say is that the man must not be hanged if it can be avoided."

"I do not see how it is possible to avoid it, Abner," said Mrs. DeLong.

"Nor do I."

"He deserves his fate, and must meet it."

"Well, the last orders given to Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men were to take the man alive at all hazards."

"They were to try and corral him, and force him to surrender, for all of us at the fort, including the chaplain I may say, have had a longing to see that man hanged."

"But now I realize that it must not be, and that he must not be taken alive."

"Oh, Abner! what do you mean?" cried Mrs. DeLong.

"My sweet wife, I simply mean that I shall go and see Dashing Charlie and tell him that the man must not be taken alive."

"That when his Minute Men find him, they must return shot for shot, and in that case there will be no hanging, no confession before it of who he is, and Gabrielle's secret will be kept as though it were in a grave."

"In fact, now I think of it, hanging is the most cruel of punishments and should be abolished."

"In this case we will abolish it."

"Abner DeLong, you are a fraud," said his wife.

"If you are, Abner, it will be on the side of right, I feel, and I thank you for it, for how much rather would I have Raleigh, if only for his own sake, shot instead of hanged; but the thought of either is awful."

"Waste no pity upon him, Gabrielle, for remember how red his hands are with innocent blood, the lives of women and children, even, having been mercilessly taken from his greed of gold."

"No, no; he deserves death a hundred times, but to-morrow I'll go to Dashing Charlie and countermand my orders about taking him alive."

CHAPTER LXIV.

MET ON THE TRAIL.

THE following morning after the talk with Gabrielle, Captain DeLong met her at breakfast, looking far happier than she had the past few days.

"I have made my confession, Abner, and I feel better for it," she said.

Then she turned to him earnestly and continued:

"I suppose you will consider me foolish to say so, but do you know that Raleigh is not the Mounted Tramp?"

"So I have thought, Gabrielle."

"I have never ceased to think so. The man who saved us from the Indians, who did the noble service which the Mounted Tramp did, was not Raleigh Garnett, my degenerate brother."

"I wish I could now believe so, but I cannot, Gabrielle."

"I have faith, and I will not lose it. I saw Raleigh in his disguise, and yet I saw enough to know that he was not the man who enlisted as a private in your troop."

"But the furlough in his possession, Gabrielle?"

"I do not understand that, it is all a mystery; but still I have faith that the Mounted Tramp and Black Horse Bill are not one and the same man."

"Well, I hope something may happen to prove that your faith is not shattered."

"I must now be off, however, to see the general and then go to countermand my orders to Dashing Charlie."

Soon after Captain DeLong mounted his horse and rode away alone on his visit to Dashing Charlie's camp.

He found the scouts encamped near Devil's Ladder, and at once calling Dashing Charlie aside asked:

"Any news, Charlie?"

"None, sir."

"Did you go to the rocks last night with your men?"

"I went alone, sir, but they have promised to go to-night."

"Did you see any ghosts?"

"None, sir, last night, but I hope to see one to-night, and will try and catch him alive."

"Now, Dashing Charlie, I wish to tell you that I have come to countermand my orders to you to take Black Horse Bill alive, should you get the chance to do so."

"You wish him shot down then, sir?"

"Yes, for we do not wish any more hangings at Fort Advance."

"The hanging of those outlaws the other day has positively cast a gloom over all in the fort, and it was a terrible ordeal for the ladies and children to know about and be so near to."

"No, Emmett, riddle Black Horse Bill with bullets, and do not leave a spark of life in him, for there must be no more hanging at the fort if it can be avoided."

"I agree with you, sir, and it will be a very easy matter for the men to kill him, as he is not going to be taken alive, if he can prevent it in any way."

"Now tell me what you think of this ghost business?"

"Well, sir, since Racket Rube has said that he saw other outlaws than Black Horse Bill, I am sure that the ghosts can be none other than the men."

"It is easy enough to play ghost if they had any idea that we were spying upon them."

"But you have not seen any ghost since the night you shot at one?"

"No, sir."

"You never miss your aim, Charlie?"

"I missed that night, sir, three shots."

"True, but I believe you will solve the mystery when you kill Black Horse Bill and run down his band."

"I hope so, sir, and I am camping on this

trail in full confidence that the end will be here some day."

After some further conversation Captain DeLong started upon his return to the fort.

He rode slowly, for he wished to think.

Gabrielle's story had impressed him deeply, and he felt the deepest sympathy for the beautiful woman whose life had been so clouded, where all should have been happiness.

As he drew near the fort he saw a horseman in the distance, also going in the direction that he was.

Both were riding at the same gait and so verging toward each other that they would meet in the trail half a mile ahead.

The stranger was coming from the direction of the Divide, and was mounted upon a jet-black horse.

As he drew nearer, Captain DeLong gazed at him more closely, and suddenly from his lips came the words hoarsely uttered:

"By heaven! it is Black Horse Bill!"

CHAPTER LXV.

AN UNLOOKED FOR MEETING.

CAPTAIN DeLONG's face paled with emotion, and his eyes flashed fire as he saw that the horseman who was approaching him was none other than the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill!

He loosened his revolver in his holster, and setting his teeth firmly, said:

"Yes, it must be, though, for her sake, I would rather he did not die by my hand, or I by his, as the case may be, for I have a desperate man to deal with."

Then, as he drew nearer, he whipped out his revolver, wheeled his horse and started toward the horseman in a charge, while he called out:

"Now for it, Black Horse Bill! It is your life or mine!"

To his utter amazement, and also chagrin, the man halted and at once threw both hands above his head, while he called out:

"Do not kill me, Captain DeLong."

This disarmed the captain and he did not pull trigger, as he was about to do, for he could not fire upon one who so appealed to him for his life.

He halted within a few paces of him, and still keeping his revolver leveled, said:

"Coward! is that the way you beg for life, when you never listened to an appeal from others?"

"I am not Black Horse Bill, Captain DeLong."

"Hah! do you dare throw that lie in my face?"

"Captain DeLong, be reasonable. I am no coward, as you know, and I would not lie to you. I repeat, I am not Black Horse Bill; I am Horner Rockwell, a soldier of the army, and now on my way to the fort to report the cause of my delay in returning, sir."

There was something about the man that commanded the officer's more particular attention.

He was white-faced and haggard, appeared to have been ill, and did not look just as Black Horse Bill did when he had twice met him upon the trail.

"Can it be possible, after all, that you are the Mounted Tramp—that there are two men such counterfeits of each other?"

"It is the truth, sir, for I have been the prisoner of Black Horse Bill ever since I left the fort."

"Is this possible?"

"It is true, sir, for I asked for a furlough that I might go down into New Mexico and attend to some business interests I had there."

"I went to a cave in the Divide which I had found by accident when a Mounted Tramp with no aim in life, and I ran upon Black Horse Bill, who, it seems, also knew the spot."

"I had not my weapons on, so I was at his mercy, and I surrendered, trusting in his honor."

"The result was, sir, that he drugged the coffee I drank, and when under its influence I was ironed by him hand and foot."

"Then I was led to another cave, a secret retreat of his in the Divide, and put under the charge of an Indian, a renegade from his people, and a foe to all whites excepting Black Horse Bill, who had saved his life, and thus won his undying friendship."

"This Indian was my guard, and he it was who knew the caves in the Divide and in the Crows' Roost Range, and told his master of them."

"He served the outlaw like a slave, and would flit away from the cave for a day and night at a time, helping him in showing a force of outlaws where there was only one, and also trying to frighten the scouts of Dashing Charlie by playing ghosts."

"Ah!" said Captain DeLong, as the light began to beam upon him.

"You have heard of these ghosts, sir?"

"Yes, and Dashing Charlie missed one three times at close range."

"He did not miss him, sir, for it was the Indian, who, like Black Horse Bill, wears a shirt of steel wire and a helmet of iron when masquerading as ghosts."

"Dashing Charlie sent a bullet into the helmet, and two flattened against the wire, one wounding the Indian slightly and causing him to swear off from playing ghost again."

"Of course I heard all this, as they talked before me, as it was intended I should die."

"Then, too, the Indian told me all I asked him about Black Horse Bill and himself."

"I know too of the robberies that have occurred, and when the outlaw had gotten all the money he believed possible, he decided to leave the frontier as soon as he killed Dashing Charlie and Racket Rube, against whom he had a deep grudge."

"He was to take the Indian with him, for after leaving me in irons to starve to death in the cave, the red-skin was to join him at the cave near Devil's Ladder."

"This is astounding that you tell me," said Captain DeLong.

"There is little more to tell, sir, for the outlaw left me to the mercy of the red-skin, who was to leave me the next night."

"But I had, in the weeks I had been there a prisoner, rubbed my irons against the sharp rocks until I had worn them thin and was able to work them while the red-skin was out of the cave."

"When he came in I sprung upon him, and in the struggle that followed I killed him."

"That was this morning, Captain DeLong, and then I went out and got my own horse, saddle and bridle and started for the fort, to tell you my story, sir."

"Having done so, I wished to tell you, sir, that I believe I can find those three secret caves, one at Rock Creek Ford, one at Devil's Ladder, and the third at Outlaw Rocks."

"In one of those caves you will find Black Horse Bill," and the man spoke with an earnestness which carried truth with every word he uttered.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE MOUNTED TRAMP AS GUIDE.

THAT he was no longer in doubt as to the man before him being a different person from Black Horse Bill, Captain DeLong showed by extending his hand and saying:

"You must pardon me, Rockwell, for I humbly ask it."

"I stood by you as long as I could, until Black Horse Bill showed me the furlough which I had given you and told me that he was the man who had enlisted in my troop."

"He told you this, sir?"

"Yes, and had your furlough."

"He robbed me of it, sir, and what else I had with me; but fortunately my money in bulk was hidden in a secret pocket of my saddle and he did not get that."

"I see that you are not the man, now that I look squarely into your face, and I am glad to feel that the faith of Miss Garland in you has never been shaken, for she has stoutly asserted all the time that Horner Rockwell and Black Horse Bill were two entirely different persons."

"God bless her for that trust in me," fervently said the man.

"Yes, her faith was not shaken; but now let me tell you of her adventure with the outlaw, and of my meetings with him," and as they rode on together toward the fort, Captain DeLong told his story to Horner Rockwell, though he had heard something of it from what the outlaw had related to the Indian in his presence.

"Now let me make a suggestion, if you please, Captain DeLong," said the Mounted Tramp.

"Certainly, Rockwell."

"It is, sir, that upon our arrival at the fort you will allow me to first lead a few men of your troop back to the cave in the Divide, for there will the outlaw come, when he is not joined by the Indian as it was arranged he should be."

"Then, sir, I can lead others to the caves over toward the Crows' Roost Range and we will hunt him out if he is there."

"I thank you for the suggestion, Rockwell, and we will carry it out to the letter, excepting that we will go and get Dashing Charlie's Men instead of my soldiers, for they are now upon the Range watching for the outlaw."

"I am glad of that, sir. Shall we go at once to them?"

"Yes, for I will send a scout back to the fort with word to the general that I will be delayed for some day or two, and also that we are at last upon the right trail, at the same time telling him not to say a word about you."

"It would be best, sir."

"Now, we will turn back for Dashing Charlie's camp."

It was late when the two reached the camp, and they found that Dashing Charlie, leaving two men there had taken the rest of the scouts up to the range with him on a ghost hunt.

One of the two scouts in the camp was dispatched at once to the fort with a note written by Captain DeLong to the general and another to his wife.

Horner Rockwell had kept in the background, standing by the side of his horse, so was not plainly seen but the captain told the scout not to speak even to the general about any one having come into the camp with him.

The other scout was then told to go up and inform Dashing Charlie that Captain DeLong had returned to his camp and that he wished him to send him half a dozen of his best men.

The scout departed and then Horner Rockwell went off to try and find the caves near the Devil's Ladder and Rock Creek Ford.

When the moon rose he was able to place them, and returning to camp he found Dashing Charlie had just come in and was telling the captain of their unsuccessful chase after a ghost on the range.

"That is the chief, and chased as he has been by the scouts he will go to the cave in the Divide to join the Indian, so let us go there," said Horner Rockwell.

The surprise and pleasure of Dashing Charlie and his men, in finding Horner Rockwell was not Black Horse Bill may be imagined, and all greeted him warmly.

After a short consultation it was decided to leave all of the scouts to hunt about the range, excepting Diamond Dan and Curley, who were to accompany Captain DeLong and Dashing Charlie to the Divide, guided to the cave by Horner Rockwell.

So Kit Kirby was left in command of the scouts who remained, and mounting their horses the others, five in number, rode rapidly for the cave in the Divide.

On the way it was decided that the body of the Indian should be hidden, and Horner Rockwell should lie down upon his bed of robes, as soon as it was reported that Black Horse Bill was approaching, and Dashing Charlie and Diamond Dan were to keep watch.

Then they were to hear what the outlaw said to the man whom he still supposed to be his prisoner, and then he was to be called upon to surrender; if he refused, Dashing Charlie, Diamond Dan and Curley were to see that he was not captured alive.

CHAPTER LXVII.

A NAME UNTARNISHED.

JUST as Horner Rockwell had supposed he would do, the outlaw did.

When he fled for his life from the scouts, while playing ghost, he sought his cave by way of the rope-ladder, and as soon as he could collect his traps started out of the cavern.

"This is no place for me now. If I stay I will be killed or captured, so I will give up my revenge on Dashing Charlie and Racket Rube, and go at once to the Divide, and, leaving that wretch to starve, will take the Indian and seek safety as quickly as possible."

So he said, and when all was quiet he mounted his horse and rode away for the Divide.

He did not press his horse, watching closely for an amouss, and it was within an hour of noon when he left his horse in the bit of meadow and walked up into the cave.

He called to the Indian as he entered, and the voice of Horner Rockwell was heard in reply:

"He has gone."

"Gone where?"

"And the outlaw lighted his lantern."

"You told him to leave me here to die and to join you."

"And I have misled him, for he started too soon—before the time."

"But it matters not, for I do not care what becomes of him, so shall go my way alone."

"And you will leave me here to die, Raleigh Garnett?"

"Yes, and with the greatest delight will I do it. Here you shall remain to starve and rot, and let me tell you now, Prevost Preston, what I know you were fool enough to do for me."

"Let me tell you that because you loved me as a brother, and loved my sister, Gabrielle, you knowing that I was the thief who stole that money from a fellow-cadet, when accused of it, as we looked so much alike, you admitted your guilt and saved me."

"Oh, but you were a precious fool, Prevost Preston!"

"And it did not save me, for not long after, you know, I was dismissed from the Academy."

"See what I have been since—what I am now!"

"But I am rich now, and it is Gabrielle's money and my robberies which have made me so."

"Now I shall go far from here and be a happy man with this gold to buy me pleasure untold."

"But I will not trust to your dying of starvation, for the Indian may come and you persuade him to release you."

"No, I will drive my knife to your heart and end your life now and forever."

He drew his knife as he spoke and started toward the prostrate man.

But as he did so, there rung out a sharp report and he dropped dead upon the form of his intended victim, a bullet from Dashing Charlie's revolver having pierced his brain.

Then Captain DeLong sprang forward, and, grasping the hand of the Mounted Tramp, said:

"Prevost Preston, I have heard all. Yes, Dashing Charlie, Diamond Dan and Curley can swear to the words of that man."

"I heard of you at West Point, and from Ga-

brielle, and many never believed you guilty, she never did.

"Almost with his last words that man has untarnished your name.

"He told the story as it was, and mark my words, you go back into the army as an officer, for your services will gain you rank.

"I will take charge of the effects of this man, and to Miss Garland will give her own.

"But here, in this dark cavern, where the light of the sun will never fall upon it, let us make this man's grave.

"Then we will return to the fort, and remember, Preston, that we four overheard all and know that your name no longer bears a stain, is no longer tarnished by the dishonor that that man put upon it and upon you.

"He has met a better fate than he deserved, but so let it be, for never must he be known as what he really is."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN Captain DeLong was seen returning to the fort, with the Mounted Tramp by his side, and Dashing Charlie and his Minute Men following, a great shout went up that the outlaw chief, Black Horse Bill, had been taken prisoner.

But the truth quickly became known that Black Horse Bill and the Mounted Tramp were two totally different persons, and then, though Captain DeLong sought to hide the secret as to who the outlaw chief really was, when Gabrielle Garland heard of what he had said as to his guilt, she would have it a secret no longer, and at once made know the whole story of the sinful life of her late brother.

The truth spread like wildfire, and all rejoiced that the man who had suffered so keenly would now have some joy in life in the love of so noble a woman as Gabrielle Garland.

And saying nothing of that early marriage, the two were wedded again in the home of Captain DeLong, who that same day presented Prevost Preston with the commission of a second lieutenant, he having been appointed such by the President as a justice that was his due after all that he had been made to suffer, though innocent.

Once he had donned the uniform of an officer, and felt that the stain against his name was wiped out, Prevost Preston resigned his commission, and with his beautiful bride went South to find a home upon the Gulf of Mexico, there to pass their days in peace and happiness, and where they were followed by the warmly expressed wishes for a joyous life by all their friends at the fort, and where Dashing Charlie around many a camp-fire has told the strange story of the Disgraced Cadet.

THE END.

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